

Maintaining Skin Safety when using PPE

During the current Covid-19 pandemic the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) has been essential to protect against the virus. There has been much discussion in the media relating to use of PPE and damage to skin that has been caused due to extended periods of time this equipment has to be worn.

UK wide guidance (Public Health England, 2020) on the correct use and choice of PPE has been offered:

- staff should be trained on donning and doffing PPE
- staff should know what PPE they should wear for each setting and context
- staff should have access to the PPE that protects them for the appropriate setting and context
- gloves and aprons are subject to single use - with disposal after each patient or resident contact
- fluid repellent surgical mask and eye protection can be used for a session of work rather than a single patient or resident contact
- gowns or coveralls can be worn for a session of work in higher risk areas
- hand hygiene should be practiced and extended to exposed forearms, after removing any element of PPE
- staff should take regular breaks and rest periods.

It is essential staff understand the need to protect the skin in these difficult times as any damage to the skin can become a portal for potential infection. All equipment should be fitted correctly before commencement of any intervention. If possible, masks should be removed every two hours to relieve pressure (NHS England, 2020). Remember, if masks or any PPE feels uncomfortable it should be removed as soon as possible in a safe area, skin checked for any signs of damage and new equipment used prior to returning to the clinical area.

NHS England (2020) recommend keeping the skin clean and well hydrated and using a barrier skin wipe/skin protectant if equipment is to be worn for a prolonged period of time to protect against excess moisture. If a moisturising cream is being used this should be applied at least 30 minutes before applying PPE.

RCN skin safety advice

- Ensure your mask has been fit tested
- Do not apply dressings or external coverings under the mask after the fit test (the mask will no longer fit correctly)
- Stay hydrated throughout the shift
- Take regular breaks
- Relieve the pressure from face masks (when it is safe to do so)
- Check your skin for any signs of redness or breaks regularly, or at least once a day
- If there are any signs of skin damage report this to the person in charge as an incident form may need to be completed
- If in doubt refer to your local guidance or tissue viability and/or infection prevention teams.

References

NHS England (2020) *Helping prevent facial skin damage beneath personal protective equipment*, NHS England: London. Available from: https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/wp-content/uploads/sites/52/2020/04/C0129_Preventing-skin-damage-under-PPE_9-April.pdf

Public Health England (2020) *COVID-19 Personal Protective Equipment*. Available from: www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-infection-prevention-and-control/covid-19-personal-protective-equipment-ppe

Credit:

RCN Member, Dr Karen Ousey, Professor and Director for the Institute of Skin Integrity and Infection Prevention, University of Huddersfield

rcn.org.uk/skin-health

In collaboration with

