

# Position Statement to Address Double Masking and Mask Modifications for Medical Masks in Health Care Settings

Updated March 26, 2024

Version	Summary of major updates
March 18, 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guidance was last published</li> </ul>
March 26, 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Updated references with links added.</li> <li>Reaffirmed current provincial position on double masking and use of medical masks in health care settings.</li> </ul>

## Summary Statements

- Health care workers, visitors, and patients **must** continue to follow the current [provincial infection prevention and control policy](#) including the use of medical masks in health care facilities and [provincial guidance on personal protective equipment \(PPE\)](#) use in health care settings posted on the PICNet website, including [how to wear a medical mask](#) and the [appropriate use of personal protective equipment \(PPE\)](#) posters.
- Health care workers **must** continue to conduct a [Point-of-Care Risk Assessment \(PCRA\)](#) to determine if additional PPE and infection prevention and control measures (e.g., implementing additional precautions) are required to prevent the transmission of viral respiratory illness (VRIs).
- Medical masks in health care settings **must** be worn without modifications (e.g., **no** double masking or knotting the ear loops), unless advised by Workplace Health and Safety, and in accordance with manufacturer’s instructions and provincial and organizational recommendations.
- When medical masks are used in health care settings, they **must** meet medical-grade industry standards.

On March 18, 2021, the Provincial Infection Control Network of BC (PICNet), in consultation with the BC Provincial Infection Prevention and Control/Workplace Health and Safety COVID-19 Working Group, published a position statement regarding modifications for medical masks in health care settings. The position statement was issued as a response to a study and subsequent recommendations published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US-CDC) for wearing double masks or using a modified method to apply and adjust masks to improve fit.<sup>1</sup> The recommendations from the US-CDC include wearing a cloth mask over a medical mask, wearing a nylon covering over a mask, using a mask fitter, or knotting the ear loops and tucking the medical mask.<sup>2</sup>

This position statement has been updated to include additional references and to reaffirm BC’s provincial position that, in the context of preventing the transmission of viral respiratory illness (VRIs), double masking is **not** recommended in health care settings. Moreover, when medical masks are used in such settings, they **must** meet medical-grade industry standards.

As noted in the March 2021 position statement, there are limitations to the application and generalizability of the findings<sup>3</sup> from the US-CDC’s laboratory experiments<sup>1</sup> related to medical masks in health care settings. In Canada, medical masks **must** meet established standards,<sup>4</sup> which include specifications for filtration efficiency and fluid resistance.<sup>5</sup> Medical masks used in BC health care settings have been assessed to ensure they meet the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) International or equivalent requirements.<sup>6</sup>

Medical masks are designed to be used as a single personal protective equipment (PPE) item (i.e., they are **not** intended to be layered). Adding a second mask is unlikely to provide additional benefits to filtration efficiency and fluid resistance capabilities. Wearing extra layers of PPE may affect fit (e.g., ability to adequately cover the mouth and nose), may increase breathing resistance, and complicate PPE doffing procedures. Modifying PPE (e.g., knotting the ear loops on medical masks) is also discouraged, as it could adversely affect the mask fit, compromise the integrity of the mask materials, and damage the mask. These factors may potentially increase the risk of self-contamination and exposure to infectious agents. In their recommendations for improving mask fit as a public health measure, the Public Health Agency of Canada clearly states that their guidance is **not** “for occupational health purposes, including health care settings”.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, an expert Respiratory Evidence Panel convened by Public Health England concluded that “there is insufficient evidence to support the use of double masking in a healthcare setting”.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, medical masks in health care settings **should** be worn without modifications (e.g. **no** double masking or knotting the ear loops), unless advised by Workplace Health and Safety, and in accordance with manufacturer’s instructions and provincial and organizational recommendations.

## Acknowledgement

This position statement was developed by the Provincial Infection Control Network (PICNet) of BC in consultation with the Provincial Infection Prevention and Control/Workplace Health and Safety COVID-19 Working Group.

## References

1. Brooks JT, Beezhold DH, Noti JD, et al. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Maximizing Fit for Cloth and Medical Procedure Masks to Improve Performance and Reduce SARS-CoV-2 Transmission and Exposure, 2021.*; 2021. Accessed September 23, 2023. [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7007e1.htm?s\\_cid=mm7007e1\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7007e1.htm?s_cid=mm7007e1_w)
2. U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Types of Masks and Respirators (Updated May 11, 2023). Accessed September 23, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/types-of-masks.html>
3. Alberta Health Services COVID-19 Scientific Advisory Group. COVID-19 Scientific Advisory Group Rapid Evidence Report: Double Masking & Improved Mask Fit (March 19, 2021). Alberta Health Services. Accessed September 23, 2023. <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/ppih/if-ppih-covid-19-sag-double-masking-improved-fit-rapid-review.pdf>
4. Public Health Agency of Canada. COVID-19 mask use : Advice for community settings (Updated January 30, 2023). Accessed September 23, 2023. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks/about-non-medical-masks-face-coverings.html>
5. Health Canada. Specifications for COVID-19 Products (Updated December 17, 2021). Accessed September 23, 2023. <https://buyandsell.gc.ca/specifications-for-COVID-19-products#200>
6. ASTM International. ASTM F2100-20, Standard Specification for Performance of Materials Used in Medical Face Masks. doi:10.1520/F2100-20
7. Public Health Agency of Canada. COVID-19 mask use : How to make your mask fit properly (Updated April 13, 2022). Accessed September 23, 2023. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/covid-19-mask-fit-properly.html>
8. UK Health Security Agency. The role of face coverings in mitigating the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 virus: statement from the Respiratory Evidence Panel (2021) (Updated March 30, 2023). Accessed September 23, 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-and-covid-19-statement-from-an-expert-panel/the-role-of-face-coverings-in-mitigating-the-transmission-of-sars-cov-2-virus-statement-from-the-respiratory-evidence-panel>