

Front-line workers report having to reuse PPE regularly

By Maria Castellucci

MANY INFECTION preventionists working at hospitals and other healthcare organizations claim front-line workers are reusing personal protective equipment as surges of COVID-19 occur across the U.S.

In a survey of 1,083 infection preventionists conducted Oct. 22 to Nov. 5, 8.7% of respondents reported extended use or reuse was being applied to surgical masks while 73% said the policy was used for respirators, according to the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology. Additionally, 43.8% said isolation gowns and 10% said gloves were being worn more than once or for an extended period.

The reuse of respirators, surgical masks, gloves and isolation gowns is concerning because they were intended to be used only one time, said Terri Rebmann, a member of APIC's COVID-19 task force and professor of epidemiology at St. Louis University. "We don't have a lot of data (about the safety of reusing PPE) and that is where it's a little concerning," she said. "We don't have definitive evidence that reusing that equipment isn't harmful."

There has been some research since the pandemic began about the effectiveness of reused, decontaminated N95 respirators, but Rebmann said she isn't aware of research exploring the safety of reusing surgical masks.

The survey shows 56.8% of respondents work at healthcare organizations where using the surgical



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Reusing supplies

How many days are staff using a **respirator** before getting a new one?

1 day	3.8%
2 days	4.2%
3 days	13%
4 days	3.1%
5 days	37.3%
As many as possible	38.6%

How many days are staff using a **mask** before getting a new one?

1 day	12.8%
2 days	2.8%
3 days	8.1%
4 days	2.8%
5 days	16.8%
As many as possible	56.8%

Source: Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology survey, conducted Oct. 22 to Nov. 5

or medical mask as many times as possible is the practice. Additionally, 38.6% of respondents said front-line caregivers are asked to wear a respirator mask as many times as possible, while 37.3% said caregivers are told to use it for five days and 13% responded staff are told to use it for three days.

THE TAKEAWAY

Caregivers are reporting the need for frequent reuse of protective gear, despite a lack of data showing the practice is safe.

The patient safety organization ECRI and others have criticized the reuse of N95 respirators at healthcare organizations throughout the pandemic. Healthcare organizations have responded to a shortage of N95 masks by telling caregivers to wear the res-

pirator more than once, usually using a decontamination process such as ultraviolet light or hydrogen peroxide.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has released guidance on extended use of PPE such as N95 respirators and isolation gowns. Healthcare organizations must follow that guidance to ensure front-line workers aren't put in harm's way, said Connie Steed, APIC president.

"Our providers are going through PPE fatigue, so we can't let our guard down and we have to continue to communicate with professionals about proper use (of PPE) and safety," she said.

There is some evidence from APIC that PPE supplies have improved in general. In a March survey, APIC found 20.5% of infection preventionists reported their organization had no respirators and nearly 28% said their organization was almost out. In the most recent survey, 60.2% responded there was a sufficient amount of respirators.

Rebmann said the findings from both surveys aren't entirely comparable because the exact same people didn't respond, but she said the supply improvements are likely attributable to greater decontamination efforts that allow more reuse of supplies now than in March.

Steed said PPE reuse is still occurring so widely because healthcare organizations are anticipating the next three months will only bring more spikes in COVID-19 as flu season carries on along with upcoming holidays that encourage social gatherings. ●