Update on
Health and care workers
during COVID-19

THE LATEST ON THE COVID-19 GLOBAL SITUATION &
HOW TO PROTECT HEALTH WORKERS
Overview

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Current global situation

CASES REPORTED TO WHO AS OF 20 OCTOBER 2021

• Cases: > 241 million
• Deaths: > 4.9 million

Data are incomplete for the current week. Cases depicted by bars; deaths depicted by line.

WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard

* Data are incomplete for the current week. Cases depicted by bars; deaths depicted by line.
Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health and care workers

- COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the lives and physical and mental health of health and care workers
- Women comprise 7 in 10 health and care workers and have borne significant impacts from the pandemic*

*Closing the leadership gap: gender equity and leadership in the global health and care workforce (who.int)
Many health workers have died during the pandemic

However, SARS-CoV-2 infections in health workers have reduced over time

- 115 500 health workers globally, a conservative estimate, are believed to have died during the pandemic*

- Better access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and COVID-19 vaccination have decreased SARS-CoV-2 infections in health workers over the course of the pandemic, yet their occupational service continues to put them at greater risk

Apart from the risk of COVID-19 infection, other risks in health workers need to be considered. These include risks around:

- Work time and workload
- Lack of recognition, including inadequate pay and support resources
- Prolonged use of PPE and PPE fit
- Harassment, violence, stigma and discrimination
- Mental health, including burnout
- Sanitation and hygiene

Photo: WHO
Prevention of COVID-19 in health workers should be based on a risk assessment

- Purpose of a workplace risk assessment for SARS-CoV-2:
  - Determine the level of risk for occupational exposure related to different roles, work tasks and work settings
  - Plan and implement adequate measures for risk prevention and mitigation
  - Assess individual health workers’ fitness for work and return to work, including workers with co-morbidities
Levels of workplace risk may vary based on health worker tasks and roles

- Health workers should observe hand and respiratory hygiene, use preventive measures correctly and stay home if unwell
- Training on use and disposal of PPE should be provided to all workers
- Sufficient quantities of appropriately fitted PPE should be available for all workers, based on task and role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk level</th>
<th>Health worker tasks &amp; roles</th>
<th>Preventive measures for workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low risk</td>
<td>Jobs or tasks without frequent, close contact with the public and that do not require contact with people known or suspected of being infected with SARS-CoV-2. (For example: telehealth workers, remote interviewing of suspected or confirmed COVID-19 patients or their contacts)</td>
<td>➢ Use fabric masks in common areas and face-to-face meetings</td>
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<td>Medium risk</td>
<td>Jobs or tasks with close frequent contact with patients, visitors, suppliers and co-workers but that do not require contact with people known or suspected of being infected with SARS-CoV-2</td>
<td>➢ Wear medical masks and other PPE and apply standard precautions in providing patient care</td>
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<tr>
<td>High risk</td>
<td>Jobs or tasks with high potential for close contact with people who are known to be or suspected of being infected with SARS-CoV-2 or contact with objects and surfaces possibly contaminated with the virus</td>
<td>➢ Use PPE (medical mask, gown, gloves, eye protection) and apply standard precautions in providing patient care</td>
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<tr>
<td>Very high risk</td>
<td>Jobs and tasks with risk of exposure to aerosols containing SARS-CoV-2, in settings where aerosol-generating procedures are regularly performed on patients with COVID-19 or working with infected people in indoor places without adequate ventilation</td>
<td>➢ Use PPE (respirator N95 or FFP2 or FFP3, gown, gloves, eye protection, apron) and apply standard precautions in providing patient care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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COVID-19: Occupational health and safety for health workers (who.int)
Organizing work time and workload for a healthy and safe work environment

• During the COVID-19 pandemic, health workers may be working long hours with heavy workloads and insufficient time for rest and recuperation

• This can result in chronic fatigue and lack of energy, with decreased alertness, coordination and efficiency; increased reaction time; impaired cognition and mood changes

• To prevent chronic fatigue in health workers:
  ➢ Provide enough available staff, including by additional recruitment
  ➢ Distribute workload, tasks and roles fairly
  ➢ Ensure longer working hours are only temporary and that rest periods are available

Recognition for the work of health workers

- A lack of recognition, including inadequate pay and overtime can impact health workers, including resulting in departures from service
- A study by the Royal College of Nursing found that around a third of nurses in the United Kingdom were considering leaving the profession, two thirds citing low pay and almost half citing their treatment during the pandemic

*Closing the leadership gap: gender equity and leadership in the global health and care workforce (who.int)*

*Photo: [https://www.itagroup.com/insights/7-things-cause-nurse-turnover-8-things-to-stop-it](https://www.itagroup.com/insights/7-things-cause-nurse-turnover-8-things-to-stop-it)*
Prevent prolonged use of personal protective equipment

- PPE is intended to be used for short periods of time
- In the context of COVID-19, heavy workload and patient flows may require health workers to wear PPE for extended periods of time
- If used for a long period of time, PPE can cause eczema, contact dermatitis, skin lesions or heat stress

Advice for health workers on safe use of PPE

- Use non-latex or nitrile gloves in case of latex allergy
- Use properly fitted PPE
- Apply moisturizers or gel before wearing gloves and facial protective equipment
- Avoid using over-tight goggles, which can damage the skin and generate fogging
- Limit the time spent in full PPE
- Rest in a cool area
- Drink enough safe drinking-water
- Avoid using coveralls, double layering of gowns, shoe protection or hoods
Prevent violence, harassment, stigma and discrimination of health and care workers

• Incidents of harassment, stigma and discrimination have been reported during the pandemic

• Policies for prevention of harassment, stigma and discrimination should be put in place, including:
  ➢ Regulations that criminalize violence and harassment against health workers
  ➢ Policies for prevention of workplace violence in the health sector
  ➢ Policies for reporting of incidents and for security measures
  ➢ Communication around behavioural standards and community-engagement projects to prevent stigmatization of health workers
  ➢ Promoting respect for health workers
HOW TO PROTECT HEALTH WORKERS DURING COVID-19

Mental health and psychosocial support for health workers

• Health workers’ mental health and well-being can be affected in the context of COVID-19

• Levels of burnout and other mental health conditions are high among health workers*

• Recommendations to protect mental health in the workplace:

  ➢ Ensure that accurate information updates are provided to all health workers
  ➢ Rotate workers from higher-stress to lower-stress functions, if possible
  ➢ Partner inexperienced workers with experienced colleagues
  ➢ Ensure access to confidential mental health and psychosocial support services for health workers
  ➢ Train health workers in basic psychosocial skills

  ➢ Provide mechanisms for early and confidential identification and management of anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions, and initiate first-line interventions
  ➢ Promote a mental health prevention culture among health workers and health managers
  ➢ Ensure health workers who develop mental health conditions and seek help can return to their work without stigma or discrimination

*https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370(21)00159-0/fulltext


Photo: OpenAccess Government, © Martinmark
Ensure adequate sanitation, hygiene and rest facilities for health workers

- Provide hand hygiene facilities
- Provide rest rooms, safe drinking-water, toilets and supplies for personal and menstrual hygiene
- Provide space and appropriate work breaks for personal and menstrual hygiene
- Ensure daily (or more) cleaning and cleaning protocols
- Provide facilities for changing clothes and professional laundry for work clothes
- Train health workers in the safe use of disinfectants, PPE use and disposal, and provide adequate PPE
- Do not spray individuals with disinfectants (such as in a tunnel, cabinet or chamber) under any circumstances
Protect health and care workers

The Steering Committee for the 2021 International Year of Health and Care Workers issued a Joint Statement calling for immediate and concrete action to protect health and care workers to:

• Strengthen data collection and reporting on infections, ill-health and deaths among health and care workers due to COVID-19
• Protect health and care workers during and beyond the current global COVID-19 pandemic
• Accelerate the vaccination of all health and care workers in all countries

https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/2021-dha-docs/iyhcw_sc_joint_statement.pdf?sfvrsn=5fe331d2_5
Data, evidence and knowledge on health workers

WHO’s work to support health workers during the COVID-19 pandemic

• WHO published guidance on the standardized measurement and reporting of impact on health care workers

• The Health Workforce has commissioned living systematic reviews on
  ➢ Health education disruptions and adaptations
  ➢ Health workforce policy and governance response
  ➢ Health impacts for health and care worker
  ➢ Health workforce vaccination
  ➢ Strikes, industrial action and protests

• WHO has piloted Workforce Intelligence from Open Sources (WIOS) with Nanyang Technological University to use artificial intelligence for monitoring

• WHO has conducted almost 30 country case studies to examine national level human resources for health adaptations to COVID-19

• Consistent work across WHO departments and with professional associations to triangulate data on health worker infections and deaths

https://www.who.int/health-topics/health-workforce#tab=tab_1
### Resources

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>COVID-19: Occupational health &amp; safety for health workers</strong></td>
<td>This interim guide provides specific measures to protect occupational health and safety of health workers and highlights the duties, rights and responsibilities for health and safety at work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prevention, identification and management of health worker infection in the context of COVID-19 (who.int)</strong></td>
<td>This document provides interim guidance on the prevention, identification and management of health worker infection in the context of COVID-19.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Health workforce policy and management</strong></td>
<td>An interim guidance on health workforce policy and management in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OpenWHO: Occupational health &amp; safety for health workers in the context of COVID-19</strong></td>
<td>All health workers require knowledge and skills to protect themselves and others from the occupational risks they encounter, so that they can work safely and effectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Health workers and administrators</strong></td>
<td>Health workers face higher risks of infection and are exposed to hazards such as psychological distress, fatigue and stigma. Here, WHO provides the latest advice &amp; guidance for health workers and administrators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COVID-19 and health facilities: Checklist of measures to be taken in health facilities (ilo.org)</strong></td>
<td>Checklist to prevent COVID-19 infection in health facilities and protect health personnel.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Caring for those who care</strong></td>
<td>A short overview on the issues and recommendations for policy decision-makers in ministries of health and ministries of employment and labour.</td>
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COVID-19 protective measures

Protect yourself & others

- Keep your distance
- Wash your hands frequently
- Cough & sneeze into your elbow
- Ventilate or open windows
- Wear a mask