

# Compliance Alert: What to Do If You Can't Find N95 Masks to Protect Your Workers from COVID-19?



'Having a hard time finding N95 masks for your workers' You're not alone, the N95 particulate filtering face-piece respirator, which the Health Canada has recommended to protect both health care and non-medical workers from COVID-19, is in short-supply. So, how do you provide adequate respiratory protection to workers during the shortage' The answer may lie deep within the bowels of your PPE supply stocks, according to official Government guidance ("Optimizing the use of masks and respirators during the COVID-19 outbreak," March 28, 2020).

## What You CAN Do: Use Expired Masks

OHS laws typically require that N95 respirators be NIOSH-approved. The N95 respirator has a shelf life of 5 years from the date of manufacture. At that point, the elasticity and other physical characteristics essential to effective performance wear out and their NIOSH approval expires and you can't use it anymore.

At least those are the normal rules. But desperate times call for desperate measures. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, NIOSH did a quick study evaluating stockpiled N95s from 10 geographically dispersed facilities with a range of storage conditions and determined that certain N95 models retain their protective qualities and can be safely used until the shortage subsides. On the basis of those findings, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) green lighted their use.

Health Canada has adopted those guidelines and now says that it's temporarily okay to use N95 respirators past their shelf life for COVID-19 as long as you take the right precautions.

## 4 Necessary Precautions

There are 4 things you must do when using N95 respirators after their expiration date. (The guidelines don't limit how long after the expiry date you use the masks as long as the precautions are taken.)

## **1. Ensure the Straps Still Work**

Deterioration of the mask's elastic straps over time can reduce its tightness. So, ensure the straps still work.

## **2. Visually Inspect for Physical Damage**

The mask must be visually inspected, especially the nose bridge and filter material which can degrade.

## **3. Perform Fit-Testing**

Make sure the N95 can be fit-tested and that workers carry out the required fit-testing and seal check before using the mask.

## **4. Verify Storage Conditions**

If possible, verify that the mask was stored in accordance with the storage conditions recommended by the manufacturer.

## **Another Option: Extended or Reuse of Masks**

The CDC has also given the emergency okay to allowing extended use or reuse of an N95 by the same worker, provided that the respirator maintains its structural and functional integrity and the filter material isn't physically damaged, soiled or contaminated, e.g., with blood, oil or paint. Extended use is preferred over reuse because of the contact transmission risk associated with putting on and taking off masks during reuse.

## **4 Necessary Precautions**

There are 4 things to do when permitting extended or reuse of N95s:

### **1. Ensure Proper Storage between Uses**

When respirators are being re-used, employers must ensure that workers properly store their masks between periods of reuse.

### **2. Seal Checks**

Users should perform a user seal check each time they put on a respirator and not use the mask unless and until the seal check is successful.

### **3. Training & Instruction**

Employers should train workers to understand that they need to toss the respirator if the structural and functional integrity of any part of it is compromised, it should be discarded, and that if a successful user seal check cannot be performed, another respirator should be tried to achieve a successful user seal check.

### **4. Safety Procedures for Mask Donning & Removal**

If reuse of respirators is necessary, an appropriate sequence for donning/doffing procedures must be used to prevent contamination.

## **The 2 Things You CAN'T Do**

There are 2 things you're not allowed to do when you can't get workers who are exposed to COVID-19 the N95 protection they need.

### **1. Substitute a Less Protective Mask**

If the N95 is the required means of respiratory protection, you can't substitute masks that provide a lower level of protection. Example: Because they're looser in fit, surgical masks don't provide the same level of filtration as N95 respirators. So, you can't use them as a substitute when a tight fitting respirator is required.

### **2. Use Homemade Masks**

Health Canada is urging employers to be careful about using homemade masks made of cotton or other fabric, with pockets to insert other masks or filters to be worn over N95 respirators (in an effort to reuse respirators). These types of masks are unregulated and may not be effective in blocking virus particles that may be transmitted by coughing, sneezing or certain medical procedures.