

Respirator Versus Surgical Mask Use in the Health Care Setting

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Health care workers don many different types of personal protective equipment depending on the type of interaction they anticipate with their patients and clients. One of great interest in the media today is the use of a surgical mask compared to that of a NIOSH approved N-95 type respirator.

This discussion will outline the differences between surgical masks and NIOSH approved filtering facepiece disposable type respirators. The difference in the type of claims made, based on the tests completed for each device, will be reviewed.

The primary purpose of a surgical mask is to filter some of the exhaled wearer generated organisms to help prevent contamination of the work environment or the sterile field. Some surgical mask manufacturers have added additional features to their surgical/procedural mask such as fluid resistance properties to help reduce the health care worker's possible exposure to blood and other potentially infectious body fluids, secretions or excretions. A surgical or procedural mask is not designed to provide the wearer with respiratory protection compared to a NIOSH approved respirator which is designed to provide respiratory protection to help reduce the risk of exposure to certain airborne contaminants. Respirators are designed to seal to the face of the wearer, therefore, most of the inhaled air is drawn through the filter media. When a half facepiece respirator is properly selected, fitted and worn it is expected to provide 90% or greater reduction in exposure to a contaminant.

This discussion will also review the regulatory environment in Canada including an overview of CSA Z94.4-02 Selection, Use and Care of Respirators.