

Question submitted to RapidInfo4U

Are visors a safe alternative to face masks for patients who cannot communicate with healthcare professional who is using a face mask?

Short Answer

A visor offers significant protection for the wearer and can be an acceptable alternative to a mask. A risk assessment must be completed by the healthcare professional to determine if it is safe and appropriate to wear a visor. If a patient cannot communicate with a healthcare professional who is wearing a face mask, this poses a risk to their care. This risk must be assessed with the risk of contamination with COVID-19 by considering the nature of the interaction with the patient and the type of procedure being performed. Each healthcare professional must make a decision that is best for them and their patient while adhering to public health guidelines.

Long answer

The HSE Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) published, on September 22nd, an updated 300+ page document on infection prevention and control protocols for the HSE [1]. This document provides guidance on infection prevention and control procedures for any infectious disease but does specifically reference the current COVID-19 pandemic.

In the section on transmission-based precautions the HPSC document states on page 117:

In some circumstances wearing a surgical mask may represent a barrier to effective patient care. A clear face visor that extends from above the eyes to below the chin and from ear to ear is likely to offer significant protection for the wearer and is an acceptable alternative where a risk assessment indicates a low level risk and where wearing of a mask is not considered practical or appropriate.

The document includes *patient care tips* throughout and states on page 106:

When Transmission-based Precautions are applied during the care of an individual patient, there is potential for harm. The use of gloves or masks and other equipment as well as the use of signs on the door can cause worry and upset. People may feel that they are being stigmatized. Transmission based Precautions can also lead to less contact with clinical staff and family. This can make people feel lonely and isolated. This can be particularly difficult for people who already have problems with anxiety, learning disability or dementia. All healthcare workers should understand that there is a risk of harm associated with Transmission-based Precautions and that they should do whatever can be done to reduce the risk. Clearly explaining to patients why these precautions are necessary may help to reduce or avoid harm. The impact on the patient may be greater if the Transmission-based Precautions are applied for a long period of time.

The evidence

The HSE National Health Library and Knowledge Service Virtual Team examined the evidence for the effectiveness of using a visor rather than a surgical facemask in a healthcare setting and published their evidence summary on September 14th [2]. This evidence summary informed the HPSC guidelines discussed above (access the evidence summary [here](#)). The summary states that because face shields cover the whole face – mouth, nose and eyes - they provide a high level of protection. In particular, face shields unlike masks afford protection to the eye area, a potential, albeit low risk route for transmission of COVID-19. The summary states however that further research on this question is urgently needed to determine if face shields are an effective alternative. The summary concludes that a visor offers significant protection for the wearer and is an acceptable alternative when a mask is not appropriate and there is a low risk level.

Conclusion

A visor offers significant protection for the wearer and can be an acceptable alternative to a mask. A risk assessment must be completed by the healthcare professional to determine if it is safe and appropriate to wear a visor. If a patient cannot communicate with a healthcare professional who is wearing a face mask, this poses a risk to their care. This risk must be assessed with the risk of contamination with COVID-19 by considering the nature of the interaction with the patient and the type of procedure being performed. Each healthcare professional must make a decision that is best for them and their patient while adhering to public health guidelines.

Disclaimer

This document has not been peer-reviewed; it should not replace individual clinical judgement. The views expressed in this document are not a substitute for professional medical advice. The content of this document is correct as of 13/01/2021.

Rapid Evidence Search & Summary (RESS)

Our team of multidisciplinary researchers and clinicians in conjunction with the University of Limerick Library and Information Services have developed a detailed protocol for conducting a Rapid Evidence Search & Summary (RESS) to answer questions submitted to RapidInfo4U. Our RESS protocol uses PICO or PEO methods to refine your question and follows a detailed search procedure capturing guidance documents from governments, institutions and professional bodies; searching clinical and COVID specific repositories; and identifying the most recent reviews and RCTs in the scientific literature using established databases.

References

1. HSE Health Protection Surveillance Centre (2020). *Interim Guidance on Infection Prevention and Control for the Health Service Executive 2020, v1.2*. HSE: September 2020. Access this document here: <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/hseinfectionpreventionandcontrolguidanceandframework/Interim%20HSE%20Guidance%20on%20IPC.pdf>

2. National Health Library and Knowledge Service (2020). *What is the current evidence for the effectiveness of using a visor rather than a surgical face mask in preventing the transmission of COVID-19 in a healthcare setting?* HSE: September 2020. Access this document here: <https://hselibrary.ie/what-is-the-current-evidence-for-the-effectiveness-of-using-a-visor-rather-than-a-surgical-face-mask-in-preventing-the-transmission-of-covid-19-in-a-healthcare-setting/>