

What Firefighters Need to Know about Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Background

Knowing some jurisdictions dispatch fire and other first response personnel on medical calls, the following guidelines are provided for situational awareness and personnel protective planning.

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. The outbreak first started in China, but cases have been identified in other countries and an increasing number of communities in the United States.

Please refer to the Pennsylvania Department of Health for up to date surveillance information.

Patients with COVID-19 have had mild to severe respiratory illness.

- Data suggests that symptoms may appear in as few as two days or as long as 14 days after exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19.
- Symptoms can include fever, cough, difficulty breathing, and shortness of breath.
- The virus causing COVID-19 is called SARS-CoV-2. It is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person via respiratory droplets among close contacts. Respiratory droplets are produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes and can land in the mouths or noses, or possibly be inhaled into the lungs of people who are nearby. Close contact may include:
 - Being within approximately six feet of an individual with COVID-19 for a prolonged period of time.
 - Having direct contact with body fluids (such as blood, phlegm, and respiratory droplets) from an individual with COVID-19.

To protect yourself from exposure

- Every effort should be made to ensure a facemask is worn by the patient for source control (i.e., putting surgical or oxygen mask on patient).
- If possible, maintain a distance of at least six feet.
- Practice proper hand hygiene. Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not readily available and illicit drugs are NOT suspected to be present,

use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.

- Do not touch your face with unwashed hands.
- If possible and when indicated, firefighters responding on medical assistance calls should:
 - Limit the number of responders entering the scene to one.
 - Perform distant screening of individuals who have been reported as having signs and symptoms of COVID-19. This means maintaining a safe distance of six feet or more and inquiring about travel history or potential exposures.
- If emergent medical intervention is not needed, wait for Emergency Medical Service (EMS) to assess and transport anyone you think might have COVID-19 to a healthcare facility. This will help limit potential exposures.
- Ensure only trained personnel wearing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) have contact with individuals who have or may have COVID-19.
- Learn your employer's plan for exposure control and participate in all-hands training on the use of PPE for respiratory protection, if available.

Recommended Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Firefighters who must make contact with individuals confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19 should follow [CDC's Interim Guidance for EMS](#). Different styles of PPE may be necessary to perform operational duties. These alternative styles (i.e. coveralls) must provide protection that is at least as effective as that provided by the minimum amount of PPE recommended.

The minimum PPE recommended is:

- A single pair of disposable examination gloves,
- Disposable isolation gown or single-use/disposable coveralls*,
- Any NIOSH-approved particulate respirator (i.e., N-95 or higher-level respirator),
- Eye protection (goggles or disposable face shield that fully covers the front/sides of face)

If the above-mentioned PPE is needed by firefighting personnel, it should be noted the global demands have reduced the availability for rapid delivery. Therefore, fire departments may need to partner with other fire departments and EMS agencies for PPE purchases and sharing supplies.

COVID-19 remains quite dynamic and information is updated often, it is important for you to refer to the Pennsylvania Department of Health and the CDC website regularly to check for the most up-to-date information on signs, symptoms, and precautions.

PA Department of Health - <https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/Pages/Coronavirus.aspx>

CDC - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/guidance-for-ems.html>

Resources

- NHTSA Webinar: “What EMS and 911 need to know about COVID 19 – February 24, 2020
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrnbufgDqjo>
- CDC Interim Guidance for EMS and 911 PSAPs for COVID-19 in the US
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/guidance-for-ems.html>
- Healthcare Supply of PPE
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/healthcare-supply-ppe.html>
- Strategies for Optimizing the Supply of N95 Respirators
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/respirator-supply-strategies.html>
- CDC Extended use of N95 Masks:
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/hcwcontrols/recommendedguidanceextendeduse.html>
- EMS HHCD Awareness (National Ebola Training and Education Center)
 - <https://vimeo.com/393298804/d84e02e89b>
- ASPR EMS Infectious Disease Playbook
 - <https://www.ems.gov/pdf/ASPR-EMS-Infectious-Disease-Playbook-June-2017.pdf>
- EMS Pandemic Influenza Guidelines for Statewide Adoption (NHTSA 2007)
 - https://www.ems.gov/pdf/preparedness/Resources/Pandemic_Influenza_Guidelines.pdf
- Interim Pre-pandemic Planning Guidance: Community Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Mitigation in the United States, (CDC 2007)
 - https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/pdf/community_mitigation-sm.pdf
- Crisis Standards of Care: EMS Toolkit (IOM 2013)
 - http://nationalacademies.org/hmd/~/_/media/Files/Report%20Files/2013/CS-C-Triggers/EmergencyMedicalServicesToolkit.pdf