

May 5, 2025

# NKC masking policy update

## Frequently asked questions

### **Why is Northwest Kidney Centers changing its masking mandate?**

NKC is monitoring respiratory virus transmissions (Covid-19, influenza, RSV) that result in emergency department visits within King County. Currently, the respiratory virus spread is below the alert threshold, indicating respiratory virus spread is low in the community and universal masking isn't needed.

### **When will these changes go into effect?**

The updated policy will go into effect on May 5, 2025.

### **Is this change similar to what other healthcare organizations in the region are doing regarding masking?**

Yes, most have shifted to a mask-optional policy, based on the declining rates of respiratory viruses in the community.

### New masking requirements

*Note: There is no change in the masking requirement for patients with central venous catheters (CVCs) and for staff who are taking care of patients with CVCs during Ons and Offs and dressing changes.*

### **Who will be required to wear a mask at NKC?**

We continue to strongly encourage everyone (staff and patients) to wear a mask, but it will only be required for the following:

- Staff who are caring for masked patients
- Staff, if a patient requests that their care team wear masks
- Staff caring for patients with symptoms of COVID-19
- Patients with symptoms of COVID-19

### **Do I still need to wear eye protection when in the patient care area?**

Eye protection will be required for initiation of treatment and ending treatment. Eye protection is also required when there is an increased risk of blood exposure.

### **What if I work in a clinic outside of King County?**

We're taking an organizational approach on how to respond to respiratory viruses (COVID-19, influenza, RSV); therefore, changes to the policy apply to all NKC outpatient dialysis clinics. If we identify that respiratory illness cases have risen in Clallam, Pierce, or Snohomish counties, we will respond accordingly.

### **Are we still going to do the annual COVID respirator fit testing for staff?**

Yes, it's an OSHA requirement, so we will continue fit testing.

## Future masking requirements

### **Can we expect the universal masking mandate to resume? And if so, when?**

**Yes**, once one of the respiratory viruses (Covid-19, RSV, influenza) meets the King County alert threshold, the masking mandate will resume for patients and staff. It's not a matter of 'if', but 'when'. Typically, this happens around November, although it could be earlier or later.

### **What if we notice an outbreak of COVID-19 at a particular clinic?**

We'll still take the same precautions we usually do (staff wear N95 respirators, patients required to mask, etc.). If we see COVID cases climbing at multiple clinics, the Infection Prevention Team will meet and determine whether we need to change our masking requirements across the organization.

## Patient communication

### **How are patients being notified of these changes?**

We've drafted a patient letter and translated it into Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer (Cambodian). The clinics will distribute this letter to all patients during treatment.

## Additional information

### **Who do I contact if I have questions?**

Please send an email to [InfectionPreventionTeam@nwkidney.org](mailto:InfectionPreventionTeam@nwkidney.org).

### **Where can I find the masking policy?**

It's posted in PolicyStat, which can be accessed via K-Net.