Possible Alternatives to Surgical Filtering Facepiece Respirators: Healthcare

Background

During disease outbreaks recommendations are often made to provide healthcare workers with respirators at least as protective as an N95, FFP2, or equivalent filtering facepiece particulate respirator. Healthcare facilities often standardize on approved surgical N95 respirators, sometimes also referred to as healthcare respirators or medical respirators, during typical operations. However, during outbreaks availability of approved surgical N95 respirators may become limited, and organizations should evaluate whether other, more readily available, respirators would be appropriate for use. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), and the World Health Organization (WHO), recommend respirators at least as protective as an N95, FFP2, or equivalent particulate respirator, and the CDC indicates that reusable respirators and powered air purifying respirators are appropriate in healthcare settings. These recommendations do not specify the need for a surgical N95 respirator.

All filtering facepiece respirators that are certified as N95, FFP2, KN95, or equivalent can effectively filter airborne biological particles such as viruses and bacteria. There is no difference in the filtration effectiveness between comparable standard N95 respirators and surgical filtering facepiece respirators. Both are approved as particulate respirators by the U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), European Union Notified Bodies, or an equivalent agency in other countries. Surgical N95 respirators are also cleared as surgical masks by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the European Union Notified Bodies, or an equivalent authority in other countries. Surgical respirators are meant to be used during surgery and nursing tasks during which both of the following are true: the wearer requires respiratory protection and either fluid resistance (as defined by the ASTM F1862 or EN14683 standard) is required or expelled particles must be contained (to help maintain a sterile field, for example).

3M Technical Bulletin - Surgical N95 vs. Standard N95 - Which to Consider? offers a comparison of surgical and standard N95 filtering facepiece respirators based on U.S. regulatory requirements. Slight differences exist among different countries’ requirements for surgical respirators’ performance. Table 1 contains details for how surgical respirators are evaluated and regulated in a variety of countries.

In normal circumstances when disease outbreak is not a concern, most healthcare facilities do not have high usage rates for respirators and often choose to standardize across one or two models of surgical N95 respirators for all tasks. While these respirators typically have wide availability in normal conditions, unusually high demand for surgical N95 respirators during outbreaks can result in the availability of these respirators becoming limited. During times when organizations are not able to obtain surgical N95 respirators, alternative respirator options may need to be considered for certain healthcare tasks.

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1. Particulate respirators are designed to help reduce the wearer’s exposure to airborne particulate hazards. NIOSH tests and certifies respirators based on their physical and performance characteristics, including filtration efficiency. N95-rated filtering facepiece respirators have a filtration efficiency of at least 95% against non-oily particles when tested using the NIOSH criteria. The particles used to test the filtration are in a size range that is considered the most penetrating. Therefore, the test methods ensure that the filter media can filter particles of all sizes with at least 95% efficiency.
Prioritizing Respirator Use

Prioritization of respirator use can help ensure that surgical N95 respirators are available for those healthcare workers who are in surgery, need to work in a sterile field, or may be exposed to high-velocity streams of bodily fluid. If a healthcare facility is prioritizing respirator use, workers’ expected tasks and exposures should be evaluated to determine whether it’s necessary for them to use surgical N95 respirators or whether a different type of respirator may be acceptable instead. All certified N95 or higher-rated particulate respirators can filter airborne biological particles such as viruses and bacteria. It may be appropriate for healthcare workers who will not be performing medical procedures or do not need to maintain a sterile field to use respirators other than surgical N95 respirators. Examples of tasks requiring respiratory protection, but likely not requiring surgical respirators, include triage and evaluating patients with respiratory symptoms, as well as caring for

<table>
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<th>Table 1: Global Regulatory Requirements for Surgical Respirators</th>
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<td><strong>United States</strong></td>
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<td>Term frequently used</td>
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<td>Agency issuing respirator certifications</td>
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<td>Respirator approval for surgical respirators</td>
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<td>Agency clearing/approving products to be sold as surgical masks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Test for fluid resistance (high-velocity stream of liquid)</td>
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<td>Test for biological filtration efficiency (BFE)</td>
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<td>Microbial cleanliness (Bioburden)</td>
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<td>Sterilization</td>
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patients with known viral or bacterial infections. Below is an example of selection guidelines that healthcare organizations may choose to consider adding to their respiratory protection program.

**Figure 1: Flowchart: Respiratory Protection Considerations for Infectious Airborne Biological Aerosols**

**Evaluating Available Respiratory Protection Options**

Examples of respirator types that may be available when availability of surgical N95 respirators is limited include:

| Non-surgical filtering facepiece respirators | Reusable (elastomeric) respirators | Powered air-purifying respirators (PAPRs) |
Here are some considerations to help organizations determine whether any of these other respirator types might work within their respiratory protection program. Please note that none of these have the additional properties required of a surgical respirator, and so would not be appropriate for use in a surgical setting.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Key Attributes</th>
<th>Key Potential Advantages</th>
<th>Key Potential Limitations</th>
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| **Non-surgical filtering facepiece respirators**                              | • Effectively filter airborne biological particles such as viruses and bacteria  
• Designed to fit tightly to the face  
• Wide variety  
• Certified as particulate respirator |
|                                                                              | • Low Cost  
• Minimal care and maintenance                                         | • Wearer to be clean shaven in area of the faceseal  
• Fit with certain safety glasses |
| **Elastomeric respirators**                                                  | • Effectively filter airborne biological particles such as viruses and bacteria  
• Designed to fit tightly to the face  
• Multiple sizes  
• Cleaned and reused                                                       | • Wearer to be clean shaven in area of the faceseal  
• Fit with certain safety glasses (half face)  
• Communication  
• Storage, cleaning, maintenance  
• Prescription in-facepiece eyewear (Full-face) |
| **Powered air-purifying respirators (PAPRs)**                                | • Effectively filter airborne biological particles such as viruses and bacteria  
• Designed to fit over some facial hair  
• Variety of styles and facepiece/headtop offerings                         | • Storage, cleaning, maintenance  
• Care, charging, and life of PAPR batteries  
• Weight and size  
• Communication |
|                                                                              | • Wide variety of headtops  
  − Limited facial hair permitted for loose-fitting headgear  
  − Eye protection (certain headgear)  
  − More of face visible  
  − Low breathing burden and increased comfort for longer wear time     |  |
References

1) Brosseau, L.M., Schaffer, R. Do We Need to Challenge Respirator Filters With Biological Aerosols? NIOSH Blog; 2014.
5) EN 14683:2019 Medical face masks - Requirements and test methods. European Committee for Standardization, Brussels