

Interim Guidance for Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Systems and 911 Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) for COVID-19 in the United States

This guidance applies to all first responders, including law enforcement, fire services, emergency medical services, and emergency management officials, who anticipate close contact with persons with confirmed or possible COVID-19 during their work.

Background

Emergency medical services (EMS) play a vital role in responding to requests for assistance, triaging patients, and providing emergency medical treatment and transport for ill persons. However, unlike patient care in the controlled environment of a healthcare facility, care and transports by EMS present unique challenges because of the nature of the setting, enclosed space during transport, frequent need for rapid medical decision-making, interventions with limited information, and a varying range of patient acuity and jurisdictional healthcare resources.

When preparing for and responding to patients with confirmed or possible coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), close coordination and effective communications are important among 911 Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs)— commonly known as 911 call centers, the EMS system, healthcare facilities, and the public health system. Each PSAP and EMS system should seek the involvement of an EMS medical director to provide appropriate medical oversight. For the purposes of this guidance, “EMS clinician” means prehospital EMS and medical first responders. When COVID-19 is suspected in a patient needing emergency transport, prehospital care providers and healthcare facilities should be notified in advance that they may be caring for, transporting, or receiving a patient who may have COVID-19 infection.

Updated information about COVID-19 may be accessed at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>. Infection prevention and control recommendations can be found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/hcp/infection-control.html>. Additional information for healthcare personnel can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/guidance-hcp.html>.

Case Definition for COVID-19

CDC’s most current case definition for a person under investigation (PUI) for COVID-19 may be accessed at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/clinical-criteria.html>.

Recommendations for 911 PSAPs

Municipalities and local EMS authorities should coordinate with state and local public health, PSAPs, and other emergency call centers to determine need for modified caller queries about COVID-19, outlined below.

Development of these modified caller queries should be closely coordinated with an EMS medical director and informed by local, state, and federal public health authorities, including the city or county health department(s), state health department(s), and CDC.

Modified Caller Queries

PSAPs or Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) centers (as appropriate) should question callers and determine the possibility that this call concerns a person who may have signs or symptoms and risk factors for COVID-19. The query process should never supersede the provision of pre-arrival instructions to the caller when immediate lifesaving interventions (e.g., CPR or the Heimlich maneuver) are indicated. Patients in the United States who meet the appropriate criteria should be evaluated and transported as a PUI. Information on COVID-19 will be updated as the public health response proceeds. PSAPs and medical directors can access CDC's [PUI definitions here](#).

Information on a possible PUI should be communicated immediately to EMS clinicians before arrival on scene in order to allow use of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). PSAPs should utilize medical dispatch procedures that are coordinated with their EMS medical director and with the local or state public health department.

PSAPs and EMS units that respond to ill travelers at US international airports or other ports of entry to the United States (maritime ports or border crossings) should be in contact with the CDC quarantine station of jurisdiction for the port of entry (see: [CDC Quarantine Station Contact List](#)) for planning guidance. They should notify the quarantine station when responding to that location if a communicable disease is suspected in a traveler. CDC has provided job aids for this purpose to EMS units operating routinely at US ports of entry. The PSAP or EMS unit can also call CDC's Emergency Operations Center at (770) 488-7100 to be connected with the appropriate CDC quarantine station.

Recommendations for EMS Clinicians and Medical First Responders

EMS clinician practices should be based on the most up-to-date COVID-19 clinical recommendations and information from appropriate public health authorities and EMS medical direction.

State and local EMS authorities may direct EMS clinicians to modify their practices as described below.

Patient assessment

- If PSAP call takers advise that the patient is suspected of having COVID-19, EMS clinicians should put on appropriate [PPE](#) before entering the scene. EMS clinicians should consider the signs, symptoms, and risk factors of COVID-19 (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/clinical-criteria.html>).

- If information about potential for COVID-19 has not been provided by the PSAP, EMS clinicians should exercise appropriate precautions when responding to any patient with signs or symptoms of a respiratory infection. Initial assessment should begin from a distance of at least 6 feet from the patient, if possible. Patient contact should be minimized to the extent possible until a facemask is on the patient. If COVID-19 is suspected, all [PPE](#) as described below should be used. If COVID-19 is not suspected, EMS clinicians should follow standard procedures and use appropriate PPE for evaluating a patient with a potential respiratory infection.
- A facemask should be worn by the patient for source control. If a nasal cannula is in place, a facemask should be worn over the nasal cannula. Alternatively, an oxygen mask can be used if clinically indicated. If the patient requires intubation, see below for additional precautions for aerosol-generating procedures.
- During transport, limit the number of providers in the patient compartment to essential personnel to minimize possible exposures.

Recommended Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

- EMS clinicians who will directly care for a patient with possible COVID-19 infection or who will be in the compartment with the patient should follow Standard, Contact, and Airborne Precautions, including the use of eye protection. Recommended PPE includes:
 - A single pair of disposable patient examination gloves. Change gloves if they become torn or heavily contaminated,
 - Disposable isolation gown,
 - Respiratory protection (i.e., N-95 or higher-level respirator), and
 - Eye protection (i.e., goggles or disposable face shield that fully covers the front and sides of the face).
- Drivers, if they provide direct patient care (e.g., moving patients onto stretchers), should wear all recommended PPE. After completing patient care and before entering an isolated driver's compartment, the driver should remove and dispose of PPE and perform hand hygiene to avoid soiling the compartment.
 - If the transport vehicle does **not** have an isolated driver's compartment, the driver should remove the face shield or goggles, gown and gloves and perform hand hygiene. A respirator should continue to be used during transport.
- All personnel should avoid touching their face while working.
- On arrival, after the patient is released to the facility, EMS clinicians should remove and discard PPE and perform hand hygiene. Used PPE should be discarded in accordance with routine procedures.
- Other required aspects of Standard Precautions (e.g., injection safety, hand hygiene) are not emphasized in this document but can be found in the guideline titled [Guideline for Isolation Precautions: Preventing Transmission of Infectious Agents in Healthcare Settings](#).

Precautions for Aerosol-Generating Procedures

- If possible, consult with medical control before performing aerosol-generating procedures for specific guidance.
- In addition to the PPE described above, EMS clinicians should exercise caution if an aerosol-generating procedure (e.g., bag valve mask (BVM) ventilation, oropharyngeal suctioning, endotracheal intubation, nebulizer treatment, continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP), bi-phasic positive airway pressure (biPAP), or resuscitation involving emergency intubation or cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) is necessary.
 - BVMs, and other ventilatory equipment, should be equipped with HEPA filtration to filter expired air.
 - EMS organizations should consult their ventilator equipment manufacturer to confirm appropriate filtration capability and the effect of filtration on positive-pressure ventilation.
- If possible, the rear doors of the transport vehicle should be opened and the HVAC system should be activated during aerosol-generating procedures. This should be done away from pedestrian traffic.

EMS Transport of a PUI or Patient with Confirmed COVID-19 to a Healthcare Facility (including interfacility transport)

If a patient with an exposure history and signs and symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 requires transport to a healthcare facility for further evaluation and management (subject to EMS medical direction), the following actions should occur during transport:

- EMS clinicians should notify the receiving healthcare facility that the patient has an exposure history and signs and symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 so that appropriate infection control precautions may be taken prior to patient arrival.
- Keep the patient separated from other people as much as possible.
- Family members and other contacts of patients with possible COVID-19 should **not** ride in the transport vehicle, if possible. If riding in the transport vehicle, they should wear a facemask.
- Isolate the ambulance driver from the patient compartment and keep pass-through doors and windows tightly shut.
- When possible, use vehicles that have isolated driver and patient compartments that can provide separate ventilation to each area.
 - Close the door/window between these compartments before bringing the patient on board.
 - During transport, vehicle ventilation in both compartments should be on non-recirculated mode to maximize air changes that reduce potentially infectious particles in the vehicle.
 - If the vehicle has a rear exhaust fan, use it to draw air away from the cab, toward the patient-care area, and out the back end of the vehicle.
 - Some vehicles are equipped with a supplemental recirculating ventilation unit that passes air through HEPA filters before returning it to the vehicle.

Such a unit can be used to increase the number of air changes per hour (ACH) (<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/hhe/reports/pdfs/1995-0031-2601.pdfpdficon>).

- If a vehicle without an isolated driver compartment and ventilation must be used, open the outside air vents in the driver area and turn on the rear exhaust ventilation fans to the highest setting. This will create a negative pressure gradient in the patient area.
- Follow routine procedures for a transfer of the patient to the receiving healthcare facility (e.g., wheel the patient directly into an Airborne Infection Isolation Room).

Documentation of patient care

- Documentation of patient care should be done after EMS clinicians have completed transport, removed their PPE, and performed hand hygiene.
 - Any written documentation should match the verbal communication given to the emergency department providers at the time patient care was transferred.
- EMS documentation should include a listing of EMS clinicians and public safety providers involved in the response and level of contact with the patient (for example, no contact with patient, provided direct patient care). This documentation may need to be shared with local public health authorities.

Cleaning EMS Transport Vehicles after Transporting a PUI or Patient with Confirmed COVID-19

The following are general guidelines for cleaning or maintaining EMS transport vehicles and equipment after transporting a PUI:

- After transporting the patient, leave the rear doors of the transport vehicle open to allow for sufficient air changes to remove potentially infectious particles.
 - The time to complete transfer of the patient to the receiving facility and complete all documentation should provide sufficient air changes.
- When cleaning the vehicle, EMS clinicians should wear a disposable gown and gloves. A face shield or facemask and goggles should also be worn if splashes or sprays during cleaning are anticipated.
- Ensure that environmental cleaning and disinfection procedures are followed consistently and correctly, to include the provision of adequate ventilation when chemicals are in use. Doors should remain open when cleaning the vehicle.
- Routine cleaning and disinfection procedures (e.g., using cleaners and water to pre-clean surfaces prior to applying an EPA-registered, hospital-grade disinfectant to frequently touched surfaces or objects for appropriate contact times as indicated on the product's label) are appropriate for SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) in healthcare settings, including those patient-care areas in which aerosol-generating procedures are performed.

- Products with EPA-approved emerging viral pathogens claims are recommended for use against SARS-CoV-2. These products can be identified by the following claim:
 - “[Product name] has demonstrated effectiveness against viruses similar to SARS-CoV-2 on hard non-porous surfaces. Therefore, this product can be used against SARS-CoV-2 when used in accordance with the directions for use against [name of supporting virus] on hard, non-porous surfaces.”
 - This claim or a similar claim, will be made only through the following communications outlets: technical literature distributed exclusively to health care facilities, physicians, nurses and public health officials, “1-800” consumer information services, social media sites and company websites (non-label related). Specific claims for “SARS-CoV-2” will not appear on the product or master label.
 - See [additional information about EPA-approved emerging viral pathogens claimsexternal icon](#).
- If there are no available EPA-registered products that have an approved emerging viral pathogen claim, products with label claims against human coronaviruses should be used according to label instructions.
- Clean and disinfect the vehicle in accordance with standard operating procedures. All surfaces that may have come in contact with the patient or materials contaminated during patient care (e.g., stretcher, rails, control panels, floors, walls, work surfaces) should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected using an EPA-registered hospital grade disinfectant in accordance with the product label.
- Clean and disinfect reusable patient-care equipment before use on another patient, according to manufacturer’s instructions.
- Follow standard operating procedures for the containment and disposal of used PPE and regulated medical waste.
- Follow standard operating procedures for containing and laundering used linen. Avoid shaking the linen.

Follow-up and/or Reporting Measures by EMS Clinicians After Caring for a PUI or Patient with Confirmed COVID-19

EMS clinicians should be aware of the follow-up and/or reporting measures they should take after caring for a PUI or patient with confirmed COVID-19:

- State or local public health authorities should be notified about the patient so appropriate follow-up monitoring can occur.
- EMS agencies should develop policies for assessing exposure risk and management of EMS personnel potentially exposed to SARS-CoV-2 in coordination with state or local public health authorities. Decisions for monitoring, excluding from work, or other public health actions for HCP with potential exposure to SARS-CoV-2 should be made in consultation with state or local public health authorities. Refer to the [Interim U.S. Guidance for Risk Assessment and Public Health Management of Healthcare Personnel with Potential Exposure in a](#)

[Healthcare Setting to Patients with Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#) for additional information.

- EMS agencies should develop sick-leave policies for EMS personnel that are nonpunitive, flexible, and consistent with public health guidance. Ensure all EMS personnel, including staff who are not directly employed by the healthcare facility but provide essential daily services, are aware of the sick-leave policies.
- EMS personnel who have been exposed to a patient with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 should notify their chain of command to ensure appropriate follow-up.
 - Any unprotected exposure (e.g., not wearing recommended PPE) should be reported to occupational health services, a supervisor, or a designated infection control officer for evaluation.
 - EMS clinicians should be alert for fever or respiratory symptoms (e.g., cough, shortness of breath, sore throat). If symptoms develop, they should self-isolate and notify occupational health services and/or their public health authority to arrange for appropriate evaluation.

EMS Employer Responsibilities

The responsibilities described in this section are not specific for the care and transport of PUIs or patients with confirmed COVID-19. However, this interim guidance presents an opportunity to assess current practices and verify that training and procedures are up-to-date.

- EMS units should have infection control policies and procedures in place, including describing a recommended sequence for safely donning and doffing PPE.
- Provide all EMS clinicians with job- or task-specific education and training on preventing transmission of infectious agents, including refresher training.
- Ensure that EMS clinicians are educated, trained, and have practiced the appropriate use of PPE prior to caring for a patient, including attention to correct use of PPE and prevention of contamination of clothing, skin, and environment during the process of removing such equipment.
- Ensure EMS clinicians are medically cleared, trained, and fit tested for respiratory protection device use (e.g., N95 filtering facepiece respirators), or medically cleared and trained in the use of an alternative respiratory protection device (e.g., Powered Air-Purifying Respirator, PAPR) whenever respirators are required. OSHA has a number of [respiratory training videos](#)^{external icon}.
- EMS units should have an adequate supply of PPE.
- Ensure an adequate supply of or access to EPA-registered hospital grade disinfectants (see above for more information) for adequate decontamination of EMS transport vehicles and their contents.
- Ensure that EMS clinicians and biohazard cleaners contracted by the EMS employer tasked to the decontamination process are educated, trained, and have practiced the process according to the manufacturer's recommendations or the EMS agency's standard operating procedures.

Additional Resources

The EMS Infectious Disease Playbook, published by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response's Technical Resources, Assistance Center, Information Exchange (TRACIE) is a resource available to planners at <https://www.ems.gov/pdf/ASPR-EMS-Infectious-Disease-Playbook-June-2017.pdf>
[pdf icon](#)

