

Transcript Details

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Alternative Solutions to the PPE Shortage: Are They Enough?

Dr. Birnholz:

Coming to you from the ReachMD Studios, this is *COVID-19: On the Frontlines*. I'm Dr. Matt Birnholz.

Reports from hospitals in multiple states speak to a rapidly diminishing supply of personal protective equipment, or PPE gear, leading healthcare systems to adopt alternative solutions to the shortage. Some have encouraged the reuse of masks and goggles and have begun deploying other less tested measures of self-protection—from swabbing masks with Clorox wipes, to repurposing UV lamps in laboratories as sterilization tools for medical gear. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention even loosened its minimum requirements for how PPE should be used in times of shortages, suggesting that certain items be used only in risky procedures, or for more extended periods of time. This included the suggestion for using bandannas in place of masks where necessary, though healthcare organizations and clinicians alike have claimed this measure to be insufficient in protecting them against transmission of COVID-19.

Meanwhile, others have turned to internet sources for help in acquiring much-needed equipment. Nurses at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Massachusetts made headlines recently when they posted on social media requests for spare goggles, masks, and other gear from family and friends in the surrounding communities.

In some areas, hospitals have eased regulations that would have prevented institutions from accepting open boxes of supplies or donations from the public. In northern California, where many residents stockpiled masks during the wildfires of 2018 and 2019, Twitter users began coordinating efforts to donate equipment to healthcare providers at Sutter Health, Kaiser, and other local facilities.

A growing number of hospitals have also issued direct requests to the general public: UnityPoint Health in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, for instance, was among the first to appeal to those with sewing skills to donate homemade fabric masks in the event that providers can no longer obtain PPE gear elsewhere, and this appeal has since been adopted elsewhere.

The equipment shortage has also pushed specialists in various hospital wards to pioneer innovative adjustments in an effort to meet rising demand. Some ICUs, for example, began relocating IV pumps into hallway stations, with tubing extensions into patients' rooms. This novel solution has allowed medical providers to attend to IV pumps without needing to don PPE gear for close contact with sick individuals.

Efforts are also ongoing at the federal level to develop nasal swab testing kits that can more quickly and effectively screen for coronavirus without need for PPE, a move that if successful would redirect more protective gear to critical care environments. But it's as of yet unknown when such capabilities will be rolled out or whether they will truly diminish the need for protective gear in these settings.

For ReachMD, this is *COVID-19: On the Frontlines*. For continuing access to this and other episodes, and to add your perspectives on the fight against this global pandemic, visit us at ReachMD.com and become Part of the Knowledge. Thank you for listening.