

ICN Call to Action

COVID-19

1 Urgently prioritise ready access to sufficient quantity of high-quality and appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for nurses and other healthcare workers

Governments must ensure that production of such equipment is rapidly expanded to meet the demands of this pandemic and optimise supply chains for the rapid distribution of such materials. Manufacturers and businesses that are capable of assisting should step forward and rapidly scale up production or re-tool manufacturing lines to develop medical products (such as PPE).

Using their professional judgement, within the context of national/international evidence-based guidelines, nurses are best placed to select the appropriate PPE required, based on their assessment of the situation in which they are providing care. The application of practices and precautions should include a point of care risk assessment by the healthcare worker.

2 Ensure all nurses have appropriate evidence-based infection prevention and control training and the latest COVID-19-specific guidance and training

All healthcare workers must have access to infection prevention and control (IPC) training which should include application of the systematic, comprehensive approach of the hierarchy of controls. This includes the use of engineering controls, which remove or reduce hazards or place a barrier between the worker and the hazard; administrative controls, which include protocols and policies; and PPE.

Nurses must be kept informed of new and emerging COVID-19 specific guidance and advances/changes in policy/procedures as new information emerges on this virus. This must be communicated to nurses in an appropriate and timely manner.

Working in a pandemic may pose ethical challenges and nurses should be provided with ethical guidelines and procedural values frameworks to help guide decision-making.

3 Protect the health and wellbeing of nurses and other healthcare workers

Nurses are the largest group of frontline health professionals in the battle against COVID-19: their safety and wellbeing should be a priority for governments and healthcare organisations. Strategies must be developed and implemented to reduce the physical and psychosocial burden on nurses.

Governments should provide access to mental health and counselling resources.

Employers must monitor and mitigate fatigue by ensuring appropriate respite between shifts and maintaining scheduled breaks while on shift.

Nurses who fall into the high-risk category, because of their age and/or any pre-existing conditions (i.e. pregnancy, immunocompromised) should be deployed to areas of lower risk of infection.

COVID-19 exposure in the workplace is considered occupational exposure by WHO and the resulting illness would be considered an occupational disease. Governments should ensure compensation, curative services and rehabilitation are provided for infected health workers.

4 Rapidly implement/scale-up comprehensive surveillance systems to track and investigate healthcare worker infection

Early detection of COVID-19 in healthcare workers is an important protective mechanism for populations that may come into contact with them. Testing for COVID-19 should be prioritised for health workers who provide direct patient care. Health workers should be tested if they demonstrate any symptoms or have been exposed to patients who have tested positive to COVID-19 (or suspected) whilst not wearing appropriate protective equipment. As best practices evolve with increased evidence and resources, testing of healthcare workers should be in line with these.

It is essential that governments create comprehensive surveillance and data collection systems to provide up-to-date information about infection rates among the nursing and the healthcare workforce during the pandemic.

5 Ensure the financial protection and compensation of nurses

Nurses who work casually, including agency, temporary, and part-time workers, make up a sizable proportion of many nations' nursing workforces. These staff are particularly important when the permanent and fulltime nursing workforce is unable to meet demand. These nurses must receive adequate sickness benefits.

Nurses are working beyond normal working hours to address the demand for care: they must be appropriately remunerated for all of the hours they work.

Financial support should be considered to support frontline health workers who are at an increased risk of contact with COVID-19.

Governments need to provide emergency funding to assist nurses with childcare needs and cover wage losses as a result of illness or having to be quarantined.

6 Provide a safe and effective Registration and Regulatory response when rapidly expanding the nursing workforce

In many countries, there has been a call for the rapid expansion of the number of Registered Nurses and other practitioners, including expediting nursing student graduation or recalling retired nurses. These strategies must continue to ensure that public safety is of paramount importance. This can be effectively supported by National Nurses Associations, which have the expertise to ensure that any expansion of the workforce is robust and approached strategically. They will be able to support the process to maintain a competent and capable workforce.

7 Ensure a safe and effective deployment of nursing staff to areas of high demand and high complexity as the need arises

Where there are shortages of specialist nurses due to high demand and highly complex environments, careful planning must be considered regarding the deployment of nurses working outside of their traditional roles to take into consideration patient safety and professional competence. These nurses require physical, emotional and legal protections. In addition, deployed nurses must be supported with education, training, mentorship and supervision.

Senior nursing leadership is best placed to develop, guide and implement such policies or protocols.

8 Encourage, develop and support new models of care and innovation

Innovative approaches to the way care is delivered must be rapidly developed to meet the needs of populations. Nurse-led models of care can facilitate increased access to high-quality care and have proven to improve health outcomes.

The funding and use of digital health and virtual care is strongly encouraged. Telehealth, for example, has been shown to improve access to care and reduce the risk of infection transmission.

9 Demonstrate public support and recognise the value of nurses to society

This pandemic has shone a spotlight on nursing that none of us could have anticipated. Nurses are the largest group of healthcare professionals and are critical to the COVID-19 response, to keeping health systems functioning and to the health of populations.

The public has an important role to play in keeping nurses and other healthcare workers safe. They can support nurses and show they value them by continuing to strictly adhere to the latest public health advice such as physical distancing and self-isolation.

10 Capitalise on nursing leadership

It is imperative that the world's nurse leaders are involved in policy and planning decision making at the highest level to ensure that overstretched healthcare systems can provide the best possible care to the greatest number of patients.

ICN's 130-plus National Nurses' Associations (NNAs) represent the world's 20 million nurses in every region of the globe and are the repository of decades of knowledge and experience. Governments should see NNAs as key partners in policymaking, alongside their Chief Nursing Officers and other senior officials. Countries without a government-level Chief Nursing Officer should immediately engage nursing leaders to provide expertise and advice at the highest level of policymaking.

Health systems and policy makers must leverage the expertise of and support nurse leaders in clinical settings who are effectively managing several aspects of the COVID-19 response.

11 Develop and implement a comprehensive, coordinated COVID-19 public health strategy with active engagement of nurses

A strategy to control and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the health of populations and on health systems should include testing every suspected case, isolating and caring for the people confirmed to have the infection, and positive case contact tracing and quarantining.

It is vital to keep members of the public informed with regular, transparent briefings on the science behind government measures to control the pandemic. This will help people to take appropriate measures to control the spread of COVID-19 as well as increase trust and reduce potential stress and anxiety.

Nurses are at the frontline of any outbreak response. Their experience and views must be considered in the planning, organisation and provision of responses to public health emergencies. Governments must also actively engage nurses and fully mobilise the expertise of nurses in the development of health policies, public health measures and strategies.

12 Learn from the COVID-19 pandemic to be prepared for the future

The health, social and economic impact of COVID-19 is unprecedented. We must use lessons learned from this pandemic to strengthen the global pandemic preparedness and response system for future outbreaks. Strengthening health systems, particularly in countries with the most fragile health systems, should be prioritised. This should include the ability to rapidly mobilise healthcare workers, while ensuring their safety and wellbeing. This response should be a coordinated one between global stakeholders and the public, bringing together healthcare, business, security and government. This will require a long-term political commitment by leaders and sustained resources to strengthen the health system and build the capacity and capability of the health workforce.