

WaterAid Nepal

Protective gear for Sanitary workers to reduce risks posed by Covid-19 pandemic

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Sanitary workers are those who work in the sanitation and solid waste chains. Their jobs can include cleaning toilets, emptying pits and septic tanks, cleaning sewers and manholes, operating pumping stations and treatment plants, and collecting, transporting and disposing health care and household wastes. Sanitary workers provide an essential public service but often at the cost of their dignity, safety, and health. Often engaged in the informal sector, as an invisible, discriminated workforce, they are some of the most vulnerable workers, and exposed to occupational and environmental health hazards risking illness, injury, and even death.

Sanitary workers play a vital role to meet the sanitation targets for SDGs. Without protective equipment, they are vulnerable to health hazards within their job and have to cope with many challenges, including those that have emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Transmission of COVID-19: COVID-19 spreads primarily via tiny droplets that are generated when an infected person coughs or sneezes or even speaking. The virus in the droplets find its way to a new host via two main ways. First, a person can get the virus by breathing in those droplets from an infected person in its proximity (2 metres), or the droplets may also land directly in their eyes. The second is called contact transmission, when the droplets reach the new host via different vectors. These vectors start via droplets landing on surfaces or in the infected persons hands (when they cover their coughs or sneezes) and then passed to surfaces touched with the hands (eg a tap or coins). The virus can remain alive and contagious on surfaces for a few

hours or even days¹. People can contract the diseases when, after touching contaminated surfaces or shaking contaminated hands, they touch their own mouth, nose or eyes.

Approximately 2 to 10 percent of the confirmed COVID-19 cases have diarrhoea, and several studies have detected COVID-19 presence in the faecal matter of patients and in wastewater, but so far there is no evidence of faecal-oral transmission.

The implications for sanitary workers are clear that they face a risk of contagion. Their services are vital and are unlikely to stop during the pandemic, but their activities expose them to contaminated surfaces such as the waste they collect, transport and sort, or the toilets and taps they clean. Those cleaning and managing toilets, or emptying pits and septic tanks, have to interact in close proximity with users and customers. Measures need to be put in place to minimise those risks.

The government and Nepal Medical Council, with the reference of WHO standard, has developed guidelines for the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health care facilities in relation to COVID-19². But it is silent about PPE use for sanitary workers, which reflects how they are neglected, even in a pandemic situation. However, interim guidance produced by WHO and UNICEF on 19 March 2020 for 'Water, Sanitation, Hygiene, and Waste Management for the COVID-19 virus', indicates the need for PPE (protective outerwear, gloves, boots, goggles or a face shield, and a mask) to protect sanitary workers against possible contamination.

It is necessary for sanitary workers to be recognized as key essential workers, to be provided basic protection and training, given the hazards that come with their job, and especially at times of emergency like COVID-19.



What is needed? It is urgent that the authorities immediately provide guidance on precautionary measures on COVID-19 and allocate resources to ensure regular supply of PPE for sanitary workers. Equally important is to train and orient them on how to handle PPE (put on, remove, dispose), how frequently it needs to be replaced and, on the need, to wash and disinfect PPE after every use in facilities adequate to each type of work. Hand washing at critical moments is also vital, and equally needs adequate facilities and supplies. In the long run, there is a need to establish a social protection mechanism for the health, safety and dignity of the sanitary workers. WaterAid Nepal will continue to advocate for PPE and hand hygiene measures for sanitary workers, while demonstrating these aspects in its' interventions.

Hand hygiene moments for Sanitary Workers	
•	Before putting on PPE and after removing it, when changing gloves and masks
•	After finishing sanitation activities
•	After contact with any respiratory secretions
•	After touching frequent-contact surfaces or money,
•	Before eating and before touching their face
•	After using the toilet

Sanitary Workers	PPE recommended
Collecting, transporting and disposing health care and household wastes	Mask, thick gloves, wrist band, footwear covering whole foot/gum boots, face shield or goggles, appropriate clothing (like long sleeved shirt and trouser), cap
Cleaning public/ community toilet	Mask, gloves, wrist band, footwear covering whole foot, appropriate clothing (like long sleeved shirt and trouser)
Operating pumping stations and treatment plants	Medical mask, rubber gloves, wrist band, hard sole shoes, appropriate clothing (like long sleeved shirt, long trousers and apron)
Cleaning sewers and man-holes	Medical mask, rubber gloves, wrist band, gum boots, liquid repellent protective outerwear, face shield or goggles, hard hat
Emptying pits and septic tanks	Medical mask, rubber gloves, wrist band, footwear covering whole foot or gum boots, face shield or goggles, appropriate clothing (like long sleeved shirt, long trousers and apron), cap

¹ Water, sanitation, hygiene, and waste management for the COVID-19 virus Interim guidance 19 March 2020, WHO and UNICEF

² Guidelines for Use of PPE in Relation To COVID-19 in health care facilities (Key Extracts)-Government of Nepal

- * Health Personnel engaged in suspected or confirmed cases of aerosol generating procedure: N-95 mask, Goggles or visor, Gloves (loose gloves acceptable), Water resistant OR standard disposable gowns, Cap: Regular disposable
- * Health Personnel engaged in suspected or confirmed cases of non-aerosol generating procedure (seal the top edge with tape), Goggles or visor, Gloves (loose gloves acceptable), Water resistant or standard disposable gowns, Cap: Regular disposable
- * Physicians examining the patients in the fever/screening clinics: Surgical mask (seal the top edge with tape), Goggles or visor, Gloves (loose gloves acceptable), Water resistant or standard disposable gowns, Cap: Regular disposable
- * Escorts or Drivers: Surgical masks, Gloves, Gowns (if physical contact expected)
- * Laboratory Staff (depending upon the chance of splash): Surgical mask, Gown, Loose Gloves, Eye protection (if risk of splash)
- * All Staff, including Health Care Workers involved in any activity that does not involve contact with COVID-19 patients and working in other areas of patient transit: No PPE required for everyone

References

https://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/health-safety-dignity-of-sanitation-workers.pdf
Tamil Nadu Urban Sanitation Support Program/Indian Institute for Human Settlement

