

COVID-19: Long-Term Care Facility Isolation Gown

Frequently Asked Questions

Note: The [CDC COVID-19 Personal Protective Equipment Optimization page for gowns](#) was primarily used for this FAQ.



Isolation gowns are an important piece of personal protective equipment (PPE) to help protect health care personnel (HCP) from transmission of COVID-19.

When should a gown be used?

- An isolation gown should be used during activities with a likelihood of direct contact with blood, body fluids, and/or other potentially infectious materials.
- Isolation gowns should be worn when providing care for residents with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 and for residents in quarantine.
- Both [CDC guidance](#) and [NIOSH requirements](#) should be considered when determining whether a protective gown should be worn.

What type of gown should be used?

There are two types of isolation gowns that can be used:

- Disposable gowns, which are designed for one-time use.
- Reusable (i.e., washable) gowns, which may be reused after laundering.

What is the process for reusing gowns?

Reusable, or washable, gowns are typically made of polyester or polyester-cotton fabrics. The manufacturer of the reusable gown should provide validated data to specify the number of times the gown can be laundered and reused. The manufacturer is also required to provide a tracking system, such as bar coding, a grid, etc., for the health care facility to record the number of times the item has been reprocessed. Reusable gowns should fully cover the torso, fit comfortably over the body, and have long sleeves that fit snugly at the wrist.

According to CDCs "[Strategies for Optimizing the Supply of Isolation Gowns](#)," using washable gowns may help optimize gown supply during [conventional](#), [contingency](#), or [crisis](#) capacity by allowing the same gown to be worn for multiple shifts by the same HCP. However, repeatedly donning and doffing a contaminated gown may increase risk for HCP self-contamination. Therefore, the risks to HCP and residents must be carefully considered before implementing a gown reuse strategy.



What is the process for reusing gowns?

When using washable gowns:

- Under normal (**conventional**) use, washable gowns should NOT be reused before laundering, because reuse poses risks for possible transmission among HCP and residents that likely outweigh any potential benefits.
 - Any gown that becomes visibly soiled during patient care must be laundered before reuse.
 - Laundry operations and personnel may need to be increased to facilitate additional washing loads and cycles.
 - Systems should be established to routinely inspect, maintain (e.g., mend a small hole in a gown, replace missing fastening ties), and replace reusable gowns when needed, such as when they become thin or ripped.
- In certain circumstances, such as when operating in **crisis capacity**, gowns may be reused without laundering when the gown is reserved for use with an **individual resident by the same staff person during a single work shift**. When reusing a gown for a single resident, follow these recommendations:
 - Store the gown **inside the resident's room** on labeled hooks to minimize contamination to the environment outside the room.
 - Each staff member should have their own gown to minimize contamination between HCP.
 - Place gown in laundry at the end of the staff member's work shift.

Disposable gowns are not typically reused, in part because the ties and fasteners often break during doffing.

What is the difference between health care laundering and home laundering?

Fabrics, textiles, and clothing used in health care settings are disinfected during laundering and generally rendered "hygienically clean." Hygienically clean means that materials are free of pathogens in sufficient numbers to cause human illness, but they are not sterile. Hygienically clean laundry must be handled correctly so that the clean textiles, fabric, and clothing are not inadvertently contaminated before use. Per [OSHA](#), employers must launder workers' personal protective garments or uniforms that are contaminated with blood or other potentially infectious materials.

Can reusable isolation gowns be dry cleaned instead of laundered?

No. Dry cleaning is a cleaning process that utilizes organic solvents (e.g., perchloroethylene) for soil removal. [Studies](#) (citations 1289 and 1290) have shown that dry cleaning alone is relatively ineffective in reducing the number of bacteria and viruses on contaminated linens. Dry cleaning should not be considered a routine option for health care facility laundry.

What if we send our laundry to an off-site professional laundry service?

If linen is sent off-site to a professional laundry, the facility should assure that this laundry service meets [health care industry laundry standards](#). These standards address how the service will be provided, including that laundry will be hygienically clean and processed to prevent contamination from dust and dirt during loading and transport. Ozone cleaning systems are acceptable for processing laundry.



We have an on-site laundry. How should reusable isolation gowns be reprocessed?

Whether laundry processing is completed within the facility or externally, facilities should have written policies and procedures which should include training for staff who will handle linens and laundry. Gowns can be safely laundered after each use according to [routine procedures](#) and reused. Recommendations include, but are not limited to:

• Handling Laundry

- Bag or contain contaminated laundry at the point of collection (i.e., location where it was used).
- Use leak-resistant containers or bags for linens or textiles contaminated with blood or body substances.
- Sort and rinse contaminated laundry at the point of use. This should not be done in hallways or other open resident care areas.
- Staff should handle soiled textiles and linens with minimum agitation to avoid the contamination of air, surfaces, and people.
- In the laundry area:
 - Provide hand hygiene products.
 - Ensure that appropriate PPE (i.e., gloves and gowns) is available and worn while sorting and handling contaminated linens.
 - Organize the receiving area so that contaminated textiles are clearly separated from clean laundry areas.
 - Ensure that workflow prevents cross-contamination.

• Washing

- For laundry processed in hot water, use a temperature of 160°F (71°C) for a minimum of [25 minutes](#).
- For laundry that is not hot water compatible, washing at a low temperature of 71-77°F (22-25°C) and adding a 125-part-per-million (ppm) chlorine bleach rinse has been found to be effective and comparable to high temperature wash cycles. Chlorine bleach rinses are not required for all laundry items processed in a low temperature wash due to the availability of detergents able to produce hygienically clean laundry.
- Follow the fabric manufacturer's recommendations for the number of laundry cycles, water temperature, and chemical detergents. The facility is not required to monitor water temperatures during laundry processing cycles unless specified by state rules. This is not required in Wisconsin.

• Other

- Ensure that the tracking method for number of washings is followed and routinely audited. If using an off-site professional laundry, ensure this is being done every time.
- Routinely inspect and maintain gowns (e.g., mend a small hole in a gown, replace missing fastening ties).
- Replace reusable gowns when needed (e.g., when they are thin or ripped).
- Note that laundry operations and personnel may need to be increased when additional washing loads and cycles are required.
- Store laundered gowns so they remain clean until use. Clean linen must always be kept separate from contaminated linen. The use of separate rooms, closets, or other designated spaces with a closing door provides the most secure method for reducing the risk of accidental contamination.



What is the process for extended use of gowns?

Extended use of gowns is an optimization strategy when providers are in [crisis capacity](#). Extended use allows for the same gown to be used when caring for multiple residents by the same staff person when the residents are known to be infected with the same infectious disease, and when these residents are housed in the same location (i.e., COVID-19 residents residing in an isolation cohort).

- Wearing the same gown between residents can only be considered when residents do not have additional co-infections that can be transmitted by contact (e.g., *Clostridioides difficile*).
- Both washable and disposable isolation gowns can be worn for extended use when in [crisis capacity](#).
- If the gown becomes visibly soiled, it must be removed and discarded or laundered per [usual practices](#).
- Separate gowns should be worn to care for residents with COVID-19, those in quarantine, and those who are known to be COVID-19 negative.

Do gowns need to be changed when performing facility-wide testing?

For [facility-wide testing in nursing homes](#), the same gown may be worn for swabbing more than one person provided the staff person collecting the test minimizes contact with the person being swabbed. Gowns should be changed if they become soiled.

What if there are no gowns available and you are unable to get any through your vendor (or other vendors)?

Start by contacting your [local health department](#) to request assistance securing isolation gowns from the county emergency manager.

- If there are no gowns available at the county level and there are no available isolation gowns in-house, the following pieces of clothing can be considered as a last resort for care of COVID-19 residents. However, none of these options can be considered PPE, since their capability to protect HCP is unknown. Preferable features include long sleeves and closures (snaps, buttons) that can be fastened and secured.
 - Disposable laboratory coats
 - Reusable (washable) patient gowns
 - Reusable (washable) laboratory coats
 - Disposable aprons
 - Combinations of these items can be considered for activities that may involve high amounts of body fluids when there are no gowns available
- It is essential that routine audits of this process are performed and that HCP have competency validation audits for donning and doffing the alternate items being used.

How should washable [gown alternatives be laundered](#)?

Reusable patient gowns and lab coats can be safely laundered according to [routine procedures](#).

Have additional questions?

Contact the DHS Healthcare-Associated Infections (HAI) Prevention Program at widshajpreventionprogram@dhs.wisconsin.gov.

