



**Statement by the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America (SHEA)
In Response to Observational Study on Effectiveness
of Surgical Masks in the Prevention of H1N1 Among Healthcare Workers**

While attention among the general public to H1N1 has subsided with the close of the flu season, our responsibility as the nation's leading healthcare epidemiologists and infectious diseases experts is to continue to rigorously study all aspects of the disease, including its means of transmission and effective prevention, so that we may better prepare our response to future outbreaks of similar illnesses.

A recent observational study from researchers at Tan Tock Seng Hospital in Singapore, published in the April *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, confirms that the use of surgical masks by healthcare workers who come in contact with patients with suspected or confirmed cases of H1N1 is an effective means of disease prevention coupled with proven prevention measures such as identification and isolation of infected patients, cough etiquette and hand hygiene protocol. The Singapore study demonstrates that surgical masks and N95 respirators offered healthcare workers the same level of protection against contracting the virus.

As researchers and healthcare workers, our goal has always been and continues to be to protect our colleagues and ourselves against disease transmission while providing excellent care to our patients and ensuring that our hospitals are safe for visitors and family members. Our recommendations regarding personal protective equipment for healthcare workers during the H1N1 outbreak, based on the droplet transmission of the virus, were that surgical masks provided an effective and appropriate level of protection except in cases where procedures being performed may cause an aerosolization of the virus. Such cases warrant the use of N95 respirators.

Though the use of surgical masks versus N95 respirators was debated during the outbreak, SHEA stands behind the science that informed its recommendation, and we are encouraged that the findings in this recent study of the experiences of frontline healthcare workers confirms what the science supports.

In order to remain effective in our ability to prevent, detect and mitigate infectious disease transmission, it is imperative that we continue to use science as the basis of our response.

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The Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America (SHEA) represents more than 1,700 physicians, infection preventionists, and other healthcare professionals dedicated to maintaining the utmost quality of patient care and healthcare worker safety in all healthcare settings. The Society, founded in 1980, continually strives toward better patient outcomes by applying epidemiologic principles and prevention strategies to healthcare-associated infections and a wide range of quality-of-care issues. SHEA achieves its mission through education, research, evidence-based guideline development, and public policy. www.shea-online.org.