

Rising Coronavirus Cases Put Fresh Strain on Mask Supplies

Hospitals, nursing homes face new challenges finding enough N95s for front-line workers

By *Austen Hufford and Melanie Evans*

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Demand for N95 masks broadly continues to outstrip the supply. PHOTO: ELAINE THOMPSON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The renewed [surge in coronavirus cases](#) across much of the U.S. is undermining efforts hospitals and manufacturers made in recent months to provide enough N95 masks to front-line workers.

Emergency responders and health-care workers from California to Florida are [using more protective equipment and N95s](#)—which block 95% of very small particles, including droplets containing the virus—as hospitalizations related to Covid-19 climb. At the same time, as restrictions on business have been lifted, factories and construction sites are

getting back to work, adding demand from workers that wear N95 masks to protect against noxious fumes and compounds.

The supply picture varies drastically from state to state.

Many local officials have made progress in stocking up since the early days of the pandemic and hospitals are also [building up stockpiles](#).

Michigan said that as of Thursday, 20% of its hospitals had less than a seven-day supply for some types of medical equipment and 6% had less than a 15-day supply of N95s. Virginia's emergency management department said in response to a records request from The Wall Street Journal that it had about 500,000 N95s and 3.5 million masks that conform with a similar Chinese standard, KN95. Vermont's department of public safety had 133,000 N95s and 969,000 KN95s as of June 18. North Carolina's emergency management department had 3.8 million N95s and about 2 million KN95s.

Hospital and health-care supply executives said they have been able to get masks more readily since manufacturers including [3M Co.](#) and Prestige Ameritech [have ramped up production](#). But demand broadly continues to [outstrip the growing supply](#), they said.

"It's still bad," said Cathy Denning, head of sourcing operations for Vizient Inc., which contracts for medical supplies on behalf of hospitals.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency estimated earlier this month that demand for N95s in the U.S. would outstrip production and imports through August. Distributors continue to cap how much protective gear each customer can order and report extensive back-orders of N95s and other equipment, health-care supply executives said.

Now hospitals treating fresh waves of coronavirus patients are facing new pressure on their stockpiles. Many hospitals have resumed procedures that had been halted for weeks, using up additional inventory of masks, gowns and gloves.

[Premier](#) Inc., a purchasing group for hospitals, said half of more than 1,000 hospitals surveyed through mid-June reported they couldn't get enough N95 masks to resume postponed surgeries.

Many health facilities are still following federal guidelines to extend the lifespan of their masks. Workers in some hospitals are wearing a single mask for an entire shift instead of donning a new mask to treat each patient, standard practice in normal times.

Pioneer Health Group in Arizona is one of 15% of nursing homes nationwide that has less than a seven-day supply of N95s, according to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, a federal agency that oversees Medicare and Medicaid. The nearly 500 employees at Pioneer Health's two elderly-care facilities are given one new N95 each week and one surgical mask each day, to wear over the N95.

“We would not have enough for one week if we were using it for how it was intended to be used,” said Amy Malkin, Pioneer Health’s chief operating officer.

Masks are also being sent through decontamination systems, which the Food and Drug Administration has authorized as an emergency tool. Some health-care workers have [raised concerns about such systems](#).

Texas sent more than 5,000 N95s through a decontamination system in the past week, according to the state’s Division of Emergency Management. The state has more than 47 million masks of all types in its stockpile and continues to order more, said Seth Christensen, a spokesman for the agency.

The agency is aware that hospitals continue to ration masks, he said. “Conservation measures are great to ensure we are not wasteful at a time when the supply chain is not fully recovered,” Mr. Christensen said.

Texas had placed orders for \$1 billion in personal protective equipment through June 7, but has canceled more than half of that amount because suppliers failed to deliver or delivered products that [didn’t pass quality inspection](#).

“We don’t even take it off the truck, and sometimes we send it back,” Mr. Christensen said. Nonetheless, the agency is prepared to meet hospitals’ needs, he said.

One of the earliest states to roll back restrictions on surgery, Texas initially required hospitals to promise they wouldn’t ask for state or federal inventory of protective equipment for the rest of the coronavirus pandemic. The state soon dropped the requirement. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott on Thursday [again halted some surgeries](#) as Covid-19 patients pushed hospital intensive-care units near capacity.

“We are still having to use one mask for the entire day,” said Serena Bumpus, director of practice for the Texas Nurses Association. “The more Covid patients we have in the hospital means the more PPE we will be required to use.”

The uncertain supply of protective equipment has limited how quickly some hospitals can bring in patients whose procedures were previously delayed.

“We have to be really careful not to overshoot and have a full hospital and be too busy and run out of supplies,” said Kathryn Schabel, an orthopedic surgeon and associate professor at Oregon Health and Science University.

Demand for masks has nearly doubled in the past month among the hospitals, surgical centers and nursing homes on a medical-supply exchange launched in April by organizations including Stanford Health Care and Resilinc, a supply-chain risk management company.

Hospitals on the exchange can request inventory to ease shortages by offering surplus of another type of equipment. Buyers for more than 2,000 hospitals have signed on, said

Bindiya Vakil, Resilinc's chief executive. Demand for N95s in some sizes exceeds supply, she said.

Some hospitals have found new mask suppliers, including Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. Cedars-Sinai is burning through N95 masks more quickly since resuming surgery, said Jeff Smith, executive vice president of hospital operations, but has months of protective equipment in inventory and is working with Los Angeles County to create a public stockpile.

Cedars-Sinai continues to perform procedures postponed earlier by the pandemic, and Dr. Smith said patients in need of care shouldn't avoid hospitals.

"It could lead to a second public-health crisis," he said.

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