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## NSW IPAC response and escalation framework

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### 3.1 Introduction

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The NSW Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) Response and Escalation Framework provides a structured, evidence-informed approach to managing transmission risks associated with acute respiratory infections (ARIs) and other communicable diseases of state or national significance across the NSW health system.

Originally developed to support health services in responding to varying levels of COVID-19 transmission risk, the framework has evolved to encompass a broader range of respiratory and emerging infectious diseases. It is underpinned by NSW, national and international evidence, together with lessons learned from operational experience.

The framework is embedded within routine infection prevention and control programs and establishes a foundational level of preparedness that applies across all NSW Health facilities. This baseline approach ensures the consistent application of robust IPAC practices, with additional escalation measures implemented according to local risk assessments, disease prevalence, and healthcare system impact.

Statewide alert levels are informed by health system surveillance and risk monitoring, with the minimum state alert level determined by the NSW Health Secretary. Local Health Districts (LHDs) and Specialty Health Networks (SHNs) are responsible for undertaking local risk assessments and implement additional IPAC measures where required to address local epidemiology, transmission risk, or operational pressures.

The framework supports a coordinated and scalable response by enabling health services to:

- Maintain a consistent baseline of infection prevention and control practices.
- Implement proportionate escalation measures based on local transmission risks and healthcare system impact.
- Adapt responses in consultation with Infection Prevention and Control and Infectious Diseases teams.
- Apply outbreak management principles in accordance with relevant NSW Health policy and guidance.
- Respond effectively to future pandemics, emerging communicable diseases, and high-consequence infectious diseases (HCIDs).

While the NSW health system operates at the foundational level, health services may introduce enhanced control measures in line with the framework, the [Infection Prevention and Control in Healthcare Settings \(PD2023\\_025\)](#) policy directive and the [Triggers for Escalation Following Detection of Infection Outbreaks or Clusters \(GL2024\\_013\)](#) guideline.

### 3.2 Emergency response governance

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The NSW Health State preparedness and response unit is responsible for 'whole of health' state-level preparedness and response to critical incidents and public health emergencies including those involving infectious diseases.

During an emergency response, NSW Health works closely with partner agencies to ensure timely communication and coordinated decision-making. This collaboration enables the development and implementation of the most effective and appropriate strategies to manage emerging threats.

In the event of a communicable disease of state or national significance particularly high consequence infectious diseases (HCIDs), NSW Health leads a centralised and specialised response. This approach is designed to mitigate the risk of a public health emergency and minimise impacts on the healthcare system.

For detailed guidance refer to the NSW Health policy directive on [Early Response to High Consequence Infectious Diseases \(PD2024\\_005\)](#) and [CEC High Consequence Infectious Diseases](#).

## 3.3 Escalation principles

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During situations of increased risk, it is important to be able to escalate and provide a proportionate response with specific IPAC precautions to align with the level of community transmission or level of healthcare transmission and impact. These escalation principles can be applied locally using local parameters. The statewide level of risk including escalation or de-escalation is assessed and guided by the MoH. In the absence of a statewide alert level, foundational level forms the entry level of operation.

### Transition between risk levels

During a statewide pandemic or outbreak response, NSW Health follows a coordinated, statewide decision making process. Transitions between risk levels are based on a combination of community transmission, the public health response and the impact of infection on the health system. If an LHD/SHN identifies local community risk that requires further assessment, the Chief Executive should escalate this to the Chief Health Officer (CHO), who may convene an extraordinary meeting to determine the appropriate NSW Health response. Additional precautions may also be mandated through Public Health Orders when required by community transmission or epidemiological risk.

Escalation to higher transmission risk levels requires LHDs/SHNs to rapidly implement the controls associated with that level. De-escalation may require additional communication and may take longer to operationalise.

LHDs/SHNs are expected to apply the framework consistently, incorporating local learnings and ensuring appropriate reporting and escalation. Private and independent healthcare providers may refer to CEC guidance to support their own local risk assessments.

### System impact

A system impact alert reflects additional pressures on the health system, including rising case numbers and significant staff or service impacts. This alert level may be applied alongside the locally assigned risk level or the level determined through the risk escalation framework and may relate to impacts beyond IPAC. Local implementation of system impact strategies should follow established escalation processes. This additional alert level is informed by NSW, national and international experience and evidence. System impact alerts are most likely to be triggered by large scale local outbreaks or the need for a statewide intervention.

System-impact considerations are applied in conjunction with the current risk alert level to provide comprehensive guidance for healthcare services. Examples of potential triggers for system impact are outlined in the table below.

Table 12 System impact alert level

| System impact alert level |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Workforce                 | Significant impact due to critical staff shortages; large furlough numbers, contact numbers and positive HW case numbers.                                                                                                                              |
| ICU capacity              | <20-25% ICU bed capacity including surge beds (either bed availability and/or staff to manage beds), unable to deliver usual services.                                                                                                                 |
| Hospital capacity         | Hospital at capacity and/or unable to be staffed due to sick leave. Substantial delay in admissions, unable to admit elective patients.                                                                                                                |
| ED capacity               | Either significant number of ED presentations (inadequate beds and/or inadequate staff numbers); serious delays in patient assessment times; inability to admit or delays in admission.                                                                |
| Transport capacity        | NSW Ambulance & HealthShare NSW: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Either significant or marked increase in demand and/or serious delays in transport timeliness and response times.</li> <li>• A high proportion of ARI transports.</li> </ul> |
| PPE availability          | Significant or marked increase in demand, major strategies to manage and ensure supply, with or without impact on stock supply.                                                                                                                        |
| Surgery                   | Emergency surgery only. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk assessment for day procedures to continue</li> <li>• Emergency day procedures where capacity and pressure on system continues to rise</li> </ul>                                 |

### Alert level plus

An alert level PLUS may be applied when additional measures are required within an existing risk level but a full escalation to the next level is not warranted. Local services may implement this level as needed. Where a statewide alert level PLUS is required, the CHO will provide advice.

## 3.4 General principles for all settings and all scenarios

The following principles provide a robust framework for LHD/SHNs and other healthcare organisations to manage risk and apply to all settings and all scenarios. A key focus during escalation is to ensure that the hierarchy of controls combined with IPAC are in place and to look at the use of PPE in response to the level of community transmission.

The foundational principles of IPAC must always be applied across all settings. These principles apply across all scenarios and are listed below:

1. Administrative and engineering controls
2. Standard precautions for all healthcare interactions
3. Enhanced cleaning of high touch surfaces
4. Transmission based precautions
5. Test if symptomatic (for example, COVID-19)
6. Health workers stay at home if they are unwell

## 7. NSW Health guide to healthcare visitation.

### NSW IPAC Response and escalation framework - Principles for IPAC monitoring and management for local implementation

The NSW IPAC Framework for Respiratory and COVID-Safe Healthcare, provides a structured and scalable approach to IPAC for ARI across healthcare settings. Based on current evidence and local, national and international experience, it outlines core and escalated measures for managing low, moderate and high transmission risk scenarios, including clinical care, workforce protection, ventilation, PPE and outbreak management.

Aligned with NSW Health policy and the IPAC Response and Escalation Framework, it supports Local Health Districts and Specialty Health Networks to implement proportionate responses to changing epidemiological conditions. A summary of the [framework's risk matrix](#) and recommended control measures is available on the CEC website.

The following should be read in conjunction with the below additional policies and guidelines:

- Infection Prevention and Control in Healthcare Settings (PD2023\_025)
- Infection Prevention and Control Practice Handbook
- Triggers for Escalation Following Detection of Infection Outbreaks or Clusters (GL2024\_013)

Monitoring measures for local IPAC programs supported by local systems:

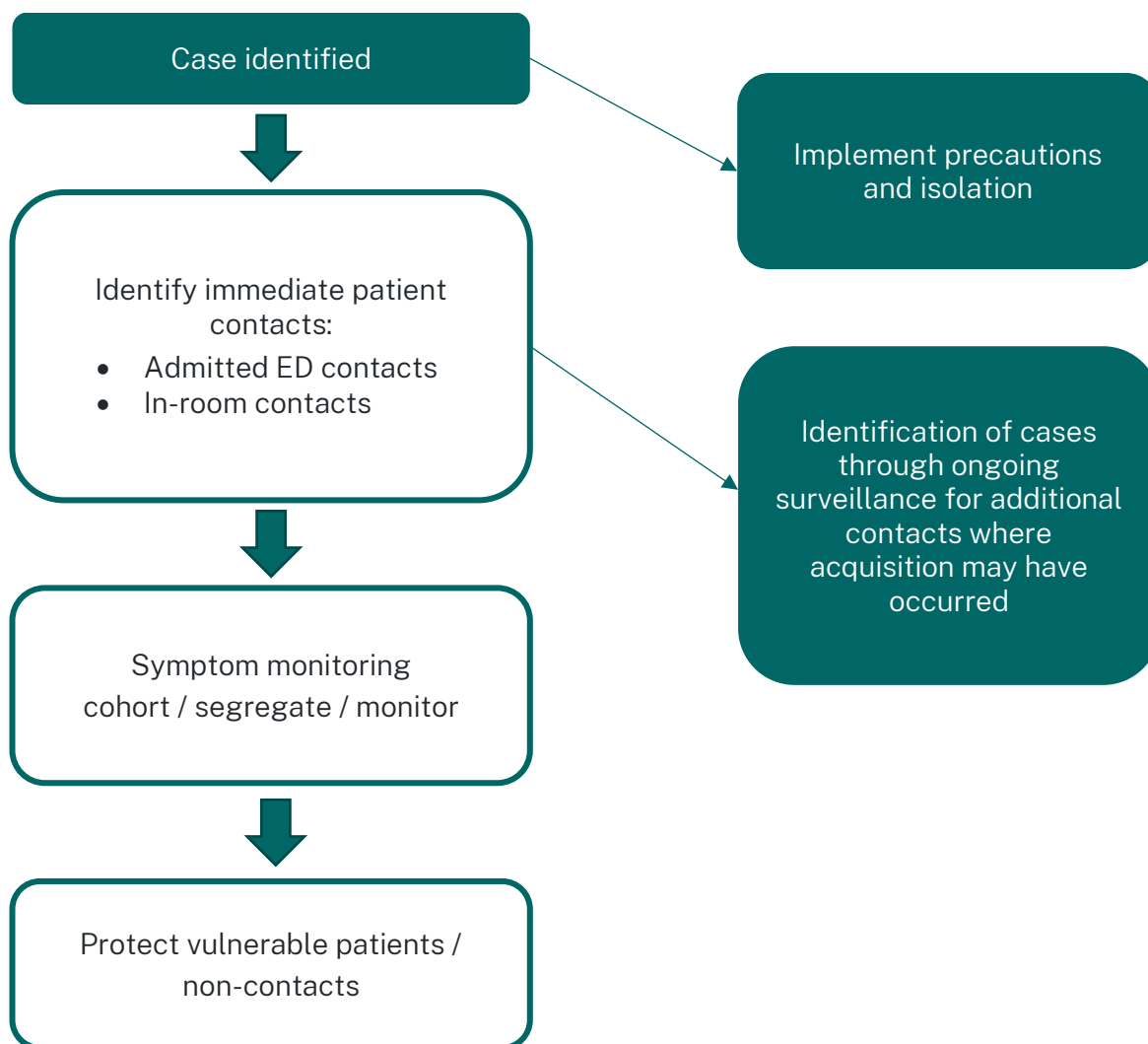
- Monitor case numbers of Influenza, RSV, COVID-19 and other communicable infections
- Targeted contact tracing as part of foundational level IPAC (Figure 3 below)
- Identification and reporting through ongoing surveillance – prevalence/incidence
- Monitor staff furloughing numbers
- Screening and cohorting of patients
- Patient flow to incorporate IPAC status supporting bed allocation for IPAC and minimising patient movements.

Escalation reasons for consideration (monitored and directed by IPAC/ID):

- Increased case numbers
- Increased clusters/outbreaks causing an impact on usual care
- Significant staff furlough
- Consideration of statewide parameters/MOH directive.

For more information refer to 3.5 NSW Risk matrix table.

Figure 3 In-hospital (targeted) contact tracing principles



Note: The above provides a high level principles approach to contact tracing. Disease specific information with additional definition of each of the above would need to be applied locally.

## 3.5 NSW Risk matrix table

This table is designed to provide an escalation response when there is a significant outbreak of a respiratory pathogen that is causing an impact on the community and health services. It was designed for COVID-19, however, the principles apply to other ARI outbreaks.

### Health worker mask use

The risk of undetected introduction of viral respiratory infections into healthcare settings varies with community transmission levels and the characteristics of circulating pathogens. During periods of widespread transmission and/or significant system impact, additional protective measures may be required. This includes the routine use of masks and physical distancing for health workers, particularly during amber and red alert levels. These measures help reduce the likelihood of inadvertent transmission and support the continued safe delivery of healthcare services.

### Recommended precautions:

- Airborne precautions: Respirator and eye protection when providing care to patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19, undiagnosed ARI or other infections spread via airborne route.
- Droplet precautions: Surgical mask and eye protection when providing care to patients with ARI.
- Standard precautions: Includes hand hygiene, environmental cleaning, cough etiquette, respiratory hygiene, apron/gown and gloves when direct and close contact with patients based on risk assessment – standard precautions apply to all settings where care is provided.

| Risk matrix |                                                                                  | Foundational<br>system prepared                                                                                                                               | Yellow alert<br>Low to moderate<br>transmission                                                                                     | Amber alert<br>Moderate<br>transmission                                                                                                                         | Red alert<br>High transmission                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Patients    | Patients with an ARI to wear a surgical mask on presentation and transit if able |                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|             | All patients in hospital                                                         | Respiratory virus testing of symptomatic patients.<br><br>Isolate ARI in single room/cohort<br><br>Paediatrics: isolate in bedspace following risk assessment | Respiratory virus testing of symptomatic patients.<br><br>Isolate ARI in single room/cohort. Cohort confirmed ARIs with same virus. | Respiratory virus testing of symptomatic patients.<br><br>Targeted screening.<br><br>Manage suspected or confirmed ARI patients in a single room where possible | Surveillance screening of patients.<br>Manage suspected or confirmed ARI patients in a single room where possible. Prioritise single rooms according to risk. Cohort if no single rooms available.<br><br>Minimise patient movement where safe to do |

| Risk matrix         |                                                                                                             | Foundational<br>system prepared                                                                                                                                                           | Yellow alert<br>Low to moderate<br>transmission                                                                                                                                | Amber alert<br>Moderate<br>transmission                                                                                          | Red alert<br>High transmission                                                                   |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Patients<br>(cont.) | Presenting directly to ED, birth suite, medical imaging, rehabilitation, outpatient and community services. | All patients with ARI to wear a surgical mask on presentation and during transit if able                                                                                                  | All patients to wear a surgical mask on presentation and during transit if able.                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                  | Patients to wear a surgical mask when receiving care if able                                     |
|                     | Maternity (including presenting directly to birthing suite) and paediatric patients                         | Mothers, parents and participants in care with ARI to wear a surgical mask if able.<br>Mother and baby to remain together.<br>Children 12 years and under are not required to wear a mask | Mothers, parents and participants in care to wear a surgical mask if able<br>Mother and baby to remain together<br>Children 12 years and under are not required to wear a mask |                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                  |
|                     | Home based care (patients seen in their own home)                                                           | All patients with ARI to wear a surgical mask if able, when HW(s) visiting                                                                                                                | Patients with ARI to wear a surgical mask when receiving care if able, others depending on risk assessment                                                                     |                                                                                                                                  | All patients to wear a surgical mask when receiving care if able                                 |
|                     | Vulnerable patients                                                                                         | All patients to wear a surgical mask when receiving care if able, protective isolation may apply                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                  |
|                     | Dialysis                                                                                                    | All patients with suspected or confirmed ARI to wear a surgical mask if able                                                                                                              | All patients to wear a surgical mask where able                                                                                                                                | All patients to wear a surgical mask where able<br>Consider enhanced patient surveillance, dedicating HWs and limiting movement. | Consideration of hospital-based dialysis for most patients<br>Surveillance screening of patients |
|                     |                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                  |

| Risk matrix                                                                                   |                                                                                                    | Foundational<br>system prepared                                                                                   | Yellow alert<br>Low to moderate<br>transmission                                                                                                                 | Amber alert<br>Moderate<br>transmission                                                                                                                                                                  | Red alert<br>High transmission                                                                                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Health workers<br>(Acute facilities, non-acute facilities, MH, MPSs, health services and RCF) | HWs managing suspected or confirmed COVID-19 patients to wear P2/N95 respirator and eye protection |                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                         |
|                                                                                               | Healthcare facility (non-ED HW)                                                                    | HW to wear a surgical mask and eye protection when providing care for patients suspected or confirmed with an ARI | HWs to wear surgical mask in clinical and patient facing areas. Eye protection when within 1.5m of a patient with ARI. P2/N95 for confirmed /suspected COVID-19 | HWs to wear surgical mask when in healthcare facilities, this includes clinical and non-clinical areas (for example, on entry, corridors, office spaces)<br>Eye protection when within 1.5m of a patient |                                                                                                                         |
|                                                                                               | HWs working in ED                                                                                  | HWs to wear surgical mask and eye protection as per local risk assessment                                         | As above                                                                                                                                                        | As above                                                                                                                                                                                                 | As above PLUS<br>All ED HWs to wear P2/N95 respirators and eye protection in clinical areas when providing direct care  |
|                                                                                               | Home based care (patients seen in their own home)                                                  | Standard precautions                                                                                              | Surgical mask when providing direct patient care<br>Eye protection when within 1.5m of a patient                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Symptom screening prior to visit<br>Surgical masks (universal mask use)<br>Eye protection when within 1.5m of a patient |
|                                                                                               | Residential aged care facility (RACF)                                                              | HWs to wear surgical mask and eye protection for suspected / confirmed ARI residents                              | Surgical mask when providing direct patient care<br>Eye protection when within 1.5m of a patient                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Surgical masks (universal mask use)<br>Eye protection when within 1.5m of a patient                                     |
|                                                                                               | Shared space for example, team rooms                                                               | Standard precautions                                                                                              | Standard precautions.<br>Cough etiquette and respiratory hygiene<br>Consider masking if crowded                                                                 | Manage the number of HWs using shared spaces<br>HWs who are high risk contacts not to use shared spaces<br><br>Mask wearing at all times. Limit numbers in tea rooms                                     |                                                                                                                         |

| Risk matrix                                  |                                                                                                               | Foundational<br>system prepared                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Yellow alert<br>Low to moderate<br>transmission                                                                                | Amber alert<br>Moderate<br>transmission                                                                                                                                             | Red alert<br>High transmission                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Health workers<br>(cont.)                    | Basic Life Support (BLS)                                                                                      | Standard and droplet precautions for BLS<br>Add airborne precautions (P2/N95 Respirator) if ARI                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                | Airborne precautions (P2/N95 respirator) for all BLS                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                              | Facility/Unit outbreak/community transmission increase                                                        | Mask wearing in clinical areas<br><br>Surgical mask and eye protection when providing care for patients suspected or confirmed with an ARI<br>P2/N95 respirator and eye protection when providing care to patients suspected or confirmed COVID-19 |                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                              | Vulnerable patients                                                                                           | Vulnerable patients are to be identified and managed as per the risk assessment                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Visitors<br>(Including participants in care) | All visitors                                                                                                  | Visitors to adhere to standard and transmission-based precautions.                                                                                                                                                                                 | Standard precautions<br>Surgical mask for visitors in clinical areas.<br>Support visitors as per local policy                  | Visitors to wear a mask before entering the facility and meet entry criteria. Exceptions managed by LHDs<br>Local policy to determine number of visitors in 4 bed bays and on wards | Any restrictions to be based on the NSW Health PHO.<br>Visitors to wear a mask before entering the facility and meet entry criteria. Exceptions managed by LHDs<br>Visitors based on risk assessment and individual patient needs and circumstances |
|                                              | Children 12 years and under are not required to wear a mask <sup>1</sup>                                      | Surgical mask as per risk assessment.                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                              | A participant in care can be described as someone actively providing care, physical and/ or emotional support | Standard precautions<br>Surgical mask as per risk assessment                                                                                                                                                                                       | Participant(s) in care must wear a surgical mask in clinical areas (wards/clinics)                                             | Participant(s) in care must wear a mask before entering the facility<br>Participants in care to be risk assessed to be able to continue providing care and support                  | Universal mask use applies.<br>Participants in care to be risk assessed to be able to continue providing care and support.                                                                                                                          |
|                                              | Visitors to RACF                                                                                              | Based on local facility advice                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Visitation to be based on the latest advice from Public Health Response Branch see <a href="#">NSW Health advice for RACFs</a> |                                                                                                                                                                                     | Visitors, including any children will require an exemption to visit<br><a href="#">NSW Health advice for RACFs</a>                                                                                                                                  |

Note: Although these principles apply across healthcare environments, when caring for vulnerable patients/residents, individual circumstances should be considered.

## 3.6 Risk matrix testing strategy table

This table summarises surveillance testing recommendations for patients, carers and participants in care across a range of healthcare settings, aligned with varying levels of community transmission. The guidance uses a risk escalation framework: yellow (low transmission), amber (moderate to high transmission) and red (high transmission or outbreaks) to support a scalable, risk-based approach. As transmission risk increases, strategies progress from minimal and targeted testing to broader, routine, and repeat testing, alongside increased use of rapid diagnostics and telehealth to reduce exposure risk.

| Low risk<br>Yellow – low to moderate transmission                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Medium risk<br>Amber – moderate transmission                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | High risk<br>Red – high transmission or outbreaks                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Symptomatic testing and no routine surveillance testing.</p> <p>Targeted testing may be indicated based on clinical judgement or specific risk groups (for example, selected admissions, some high-risk cohorts like dialysis or antenatal wards).</p> <p>Minimal disruption to usual care, with in-person services continuing as standard.</p> | <p>Symptomatic testing is standard, with targeted testing based on risk assessment expanded across settings.</p> <p>Increased use of RAT or PCR on admission or presentation and repeat testing (for example, days 3-5) in higher-risk environments.</p> <p>Regular screening begins for frequent attendees (for example, dialysis, oncology).</p> <p>Care delivery continues with some precautions.</p> | <p>Widespread surveillance including all ED presentations, admissions, elective procedures and high-risk outpatient encounters.</p> <p>Use of RAT or PCR on arrival is standard, with repeat testing and frequent screening (2-3 times, weekly) in some high-risk settings.</p> <p>Strong shift toward telehealth where possible and enhanced precautions to minimise exposure and transmission.</p> |

Table 13 Summary table: ARI risk assessment guide for PPE selection for direct care of patients

| Patient Characteristics                                                                 |                                           |                                   | Precautions Required                                                                |                                                                                      |                                                                                      |                                                                                      |                                                                                     |                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                         |                                           |                                   |    |   |   |   |  |  |
|                                                                                         |                                           |                                   | Frequent hand hygiene                                                               | Surgical mask <sup>1</sup>                                                           | P2/N95 respirator <sup>1,2</sup>                                                     | Eye protection <sup>1</sup>                                                          | Fluid resistant gown/apron                                                          | Gloves                                                                              |
| No acute respiratory infection (ARI) symptoms                                           | STANDARD PRECAUTIONS FOR ALL <sup>1</sup> | Subject to current NSW risk level |   | Risk assessment                                                                      |   | Risk assessment                                                                      | Risk assessment                                                                     | Risk assessment                                                                     |
| With ARI symptoms (important to test for other respiratory viruses)                     |                                           | STANDARD<br>+<br>DROPLET          |   |   |   |   | Risk assessment                                                                     | Risk assessment                                                                     |
| Patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19<br>OR<br>as identified as a close contact |                                           | STANDARD<br>+<br>AIRBORNE         |  |  |  |  | Risk assessment                                                                     | Risk assessment                                                                     |

1. For extended use, masks or respirators can be worn for up to 4-8 hours respectively. Eye protection can also remain on between patients. Masks/respirators and eye protection should be discarded (or reprocessed in the case of reusable eye protection) if they are moist or contaminated with blood or bodily fluids and after removal
2. Health workers required to wear P2/N95 respirators should be trained in the correct use including donning, fitting, fit checking, and doffing and be fit tested as per Respiratory Protection Program. This also applies to the use of reusable respirators.