



Mandatory non-medical mask use and requests for exemptions

Recommendations for healthcare providers

Masks should be used as part of a comprehensive public health strategy to help control the transmission of COVID-19. Mask use on its own is not sufficient to provide an adequate level of protection against infection. Masks are an additional tool to the Safe 6. They do not replace measures such as physical distancing, appropriate hand hygiene and staying home when sick.

Generally, most people with underlying medical conditions can safely wear a mask. There are very few conditions that justify an exemption.

Exemptions requests should be managed on an individual basis and approached with compassion. Conditions that may warrant consideration of mask exemption include:

- people with facial deformities that will not allow them to wear a mask properly;
- extreme agoraphobia/asphyxia phobia, which predates COVID-19;
- people with PTSD who are triggered by masks;
- people, especially children, with severe sensory processing disorders; and
- people with cognitive impairment, intellectual deficiency or autism spectrum disorder for whom wearing a mask will cause severe stress

Chronic pulmonary illness

Asthma and COPD, including chronic bronchitis and emphysema, are **not** a contraindication to mask wearing. There is no evidence that wearing a face mask will exacerbate (cause a 'flare up' of) an underlying lung condition. Individuals with chronic pulmonary illness are at higher risk for severe disease from COVID-19. Having a chronic breathing problem is a compelling reason to wear a mask, rather than be exempt from wearing one.

The Canadian Thoracic Society recommends that individuals with chronic pulmonary illness who cannot tolerate wearing a mask, avoid or minimize circumstances in which physical distancing is not possible¹.

Alternative options

COVID-19 presents a serious health risk and an exemption from mask use should be the final option after exhausting other alternatives, such as:

- trying different mask styles and materials to find one that is comfortable and more tolerable; and
- trying a mask for short periods of time around home so they can adjust to how it feels, slowly increasing the duration of wear until they can tolerate its use.

1. Bhutani M, Hernandez P, Yang C et al. Canadian Thoracic Society recommendations regarding the use of face masks by the public during the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic. Canadian Journal of Respiratory, Critical Care, and Sleep Medicine. 2020; 4(3).

Patients whose conditions are exacerbated by wearing a mask should evaluate the risks they face as well as the risks they may pose to others by not wearing a mask. If wearing a mask is not possible despite best efforts, alternate options may include:

- using alternate face covering options, such as face shields, understanding that these alternatives do not provide the same level of protection against viral spread as masks do;
- if a face shield is used, it should extend around the sides of the face and below the chin. Patients will still need to maintain physical distancing of 2 metres and practise good hand hygiene, especially if they touch the face shield;
- avoiding or minimizing time spent in indoor public places where physical distancing is difficult to maintain; and
- making use of curbside pickup or delivery services.