Best Practices for Masks: Considerations for People with Disabilities and Special Health Needs

Background

The use of masks may be a barrier for some people with disabilities, particularly for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, because masks eliminate lip reading as an effective form of communication. According to the National Association of the Deaf (https://www.nad.org), it is estimated that as many as 20% of the population has experienced hearing loss. We also know that some people with other challenges, such as sensory issues, might find it difficult to wear a facemask.

In certain circumstances, the use of masks may not be reasonable and accommodations can be made. Accommodations include safe alternatives such as social distancing. Acknowledgement, flexibility, and support for people with disabilities and special health needs is critical during the COVID-19 pandemic.

General Recommendations

For those who are unable to wear a mask, maintain a safe social distance of 6 feet whenever possible.

Hospitals and health care organizations should have a plan in place for providers to use that ensures accessible communication is available. See the National Association of the Deaf webpage: Communicating With Medical Personnel During Coronavirus (https://www.nad.org/2020/04/07/communicating-with-medical-personnel-during-coronavirus/).

For people who cannot wear masks due to medical or other conditions

Face shields may be an alternative for people who cannot wear masks due to medical or other conditions. (Moving Personal Protective Equipment Into the Community: Face Shields and Containment of COVID-19, https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2765525).
For deaf or hard of hearing people

- People can remove their mask when asked to do so by someone who is deaf or hard of hearing, if they are able to maintain a safe social distance of 6 feet.

- Using a face shield (clear plastic shield that covers the forehead, extends below the chin, and wraps around the sides of the face) instead of a facemask protects the wearer and allows visibility of facial expressions and lip movements for speech perception.

- Using speech-to-text apps, or writing notes on paper or mobile devices, may be effective.

- Clear masks are an option. The Hearing, Speech and Deaf Center website has tips on making or purchasing clear masks. See their webpage: How to Make An Accessible, Deaf-Friendly Face Mask (https://www.hsdc.org/accessible-deaf-friendly-face-mask/).

- Telehealth solutions have become more common during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are best practices and requirements for accessible telehealth video-based platforms and apps that allow the doctor and patient to see each other on video. See the Hearing Loss Association of America webpage: COVID-19: Guidelines for Health Care Providers – Video-Based Telehealth Accessibility for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Patients https://www.hearingloss.org/covid-19-telehealth-accessibility-for-deaf-and-hoh-patients/.

Resources


- National Association of the Deaf (https://www.nad.org)

- Minnesota Department of Human Services (https://mn.gov/deaf-hard-of-hearing/)