

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 \(www.nad.org\)](http://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.

Executive Order 20-81 requires Minnesotans to wear a face covering in all public indoor spaces and indoor businesses, unless you are alone.

Mask mandate exemptions include:

- People who have medical or other health conditions, disabilities, or mental health, developmental, or behavioral needs that make it difficult to tolerate wearing a face covering.
- Any person who has trouble breathing, is unconscious, sleeping, incapacitated, or is otherwise unable to remove the face covering without assistance.

General Recommendations

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 \(www.nad.org/2020/04/07/communicating-with-medical-personnel-during-coronavirus/\)](http://www.nad.org/2020/04/07/communicating-with-medical-personnel-during-coronavirus/).

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

Social distancing when possible is best practice, although recognized as not always possible. For some, 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) <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2765525>)

- People who are deaf or hard of hearing may request others to remove their mask, if both parties 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: [How to Make An Accessible, Deaf-Friendly Face Mask](http://www.hsdc.org/accessible-deaf-friendly-face-mask/) (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 Hearing Loss Association of America: [COVID-19: Video-Based Telehealth Accessibility for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Patients](http://www.hearingloss.org/covid-19-telehealth-accessibility-for-deaf-and-hoh-patients) (www.hearingloss.org/covid-19-telehealth-accessibility-for-deaf-and-hoh-patients)

If someone near you isn't wearing a mask

There are people who may not be able to wear face coverings for a variety of reasons and you may not be able to tell why just by looking at a person. Unless you are a business responsible for ensuring worker and customer compliance with masking requirements, do not confront a person about why they are not wearing a face covering but instead, if possible, ask them to maintain social distance. Face coverings protect others from you so the best option is for you to continue to wear your face covering and, where possible, physically distance yourself at least six feet from persons not wearing face coverings. Remember, we're all in this together and not everyone is able to wear a face covering.

Resources

- [Minnesota Department of Health Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus) (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus)
- [National Association of the Deaf](http://www.nad.org) (www.nad.org)
- [Minnesota Department of Human Services](https://mn.gov/deaf-hard-of-hearing/) (<https://mn.gov/deaf-hard-of-hearing/>)
- [Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind & Hard of Hearing](https://mn.gov/deaf-commission) (<https://mn.gov/deaf-commission>)

BEST PRACTICES FOR MASKS: CONSIDERATIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
AND SPECIAL HEALTH NEEDS

- [Face Covering Requirements and Recommendations under Executive Order 20-81](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecover.html)
(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecover.html)
- [Frequently Asked Questions About the Requirement to Wear Face Coverings](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecoverfaq.html)
(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecoverfaq.html)



Minnesota Department of Health | health.mn.gov | 651-201-5000
625 Robert Street North PO Box 64975, St. Paul, MN 55164-0975

Contact health.communications@state.mn.us to request an alternate format.

07/24/2020