

**HURON PERTH AND AREA ONTARIO HEALTH TEAM PHYSICIAN ADVISORY COUNCIL
JOINT STATEMENT ON MASK EXEMPTIONS
UPDATED: Oct 1, 2020**

We, the physicians of the Huron Perth and Area Ontario Health Team Physician Advisory Council, believe in providing the best care to our community. In light of the current universal masking recommendations, and inquiries from concerned patients and community leaders regarding universal masking, we have evaluated the current available evidence. To date, the current evidence for masking during COVID 19 outweighs any theoretical risks. **As such, we fully advocate for universal masking, in addition to maintaining a 2 m physical distance at all times and diligent frequent hand washing (or the use of an alcohol based hand sanitizer).**

Inappropriate medical exemptions have the potential to inadvertently hasten the spread of COVID19 in our community.

However, there are exceptional circumstances which do warrant consideration of a mask exemption. These include:

- people, especially children, with severe sensory processing disorders
- patients with facial deformities that are incompatible with masking
- children less than 2 years of age
- children less than 5 years of age (cognitively or developmentally) who refuse to wear a face covering and cannot be persuaded to
- people with PTSD who are triggered by a face covering
- extreme agoraphobia/asphyxia phobia (which is longstanding predating COVID 19)
- people with cognitive impairment, intellectual deficiency or autism spectrum disorder for who wearing a face covering will cause severe distress or disorganization
- people unable to apply or remove a face covering without help
- people with accommodations under the Ontario Human Rights Code or the *Accessibility for Ontarians with a Disabilities Act* that would pertain to wearing a face covering (i.e. immobilization in a wheelchair would not qualify unless the person also cannot put on or take off their own mask).

If you believe, based upon the above criteria, that you or your child warrant an exemption, please use this document to assist in further discussion with your school or employer. If you have further concerns, please contact your family physician's office to discuss the issue with them or a trained counsellor.

If possible, we strongly advise people who are exempt from wearing a face covering to avoid indoor public spaces where physical distancing is not possible. We further urge those who are exempt to strictly adhere to other public health precautions when in indoor public spaces, such as maintaining a 2 meter distance from others and frequent hand washing.

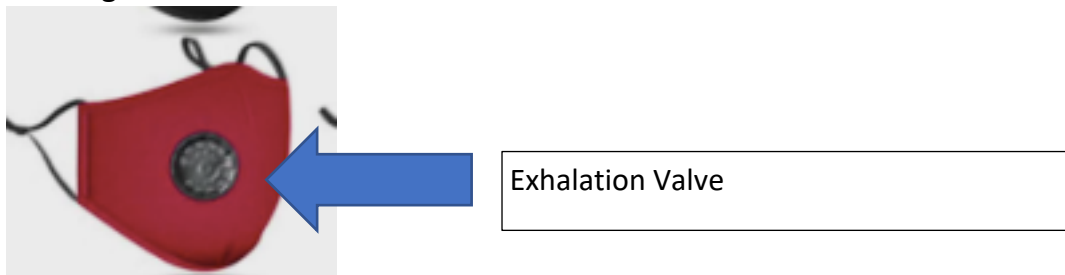
Please Note:

- ASTHMA and COPD (including chronic bronchitis and emphysema) are NOT contraindications to mask wearing; in fact, the Canadian Thoracic Society recommends that “all patients with underlying lung disease follow this recommendation” and that “there is no evidence that wearing a face mask will exacerbate an underlying lung condition”.
- Discomfort caused by the mask is not an exemption.
- Acne caused by the mask is not an exemption.
- Patients wearing oxygen can wear a mask over top of their nasal cannula. It does not impair their ability to continue to wear their oxygen, nor lower their oxygen levels.

If you choose to not wear a face covering and do not qualify for an exemption, we recommend you:

- try different mask formats and materials, to find one you feel is more tolerable
- try using the mask for short periods of time around home, slowly increasing the duration of wear at home until you can tolerate its use
- see a counsellor for support, tips, advice, desensitization, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Masks with exhalation valves should NOT be used because they allow infectious respiratory droplets to spread outside the mask and thus do not protect others from COVID-19 and do not limit the spread of the virus. **As such, patients presenting to their physician’s office with masks with exhalation valves will not be permitted in without changing their mask to a face covering without exhalation valves.**



Patients With Respiratory Illnesses Such as Asthma and COPD:

“There is NO evidence that wearing a face mask will exacerbate an underlying lung condition.”
The Canadian Thoracic Society (the professional society that provides asthma and COPD guidelines for physicians and patients)

Individuals with chronic pulmonary illnesses such as asthma and COPD are at higher risk for severe disease from COVID-19. Having a chronic lung disease is, in itself, not a contraindication

to wearing a face covering. As such, **we will not be providing exemptions to patients simply because they have been diagnosed with chronic lung disease.**

Face Masks and the Feelings of Anxiety or Difficulty Breathing with a Face mask:

Wearing a face mask may create feelings of anxiety and panic (including shortness of breath, which is a symptom of anxiety). If you cannot tolerate wearing a face mask due to these symptoms, it is advised that you:

- try different mask formats and materials to find one you feel is more tolerable
- try using the mask for short periods of time around home, slowly increasing the duration of wear at home until you can tolerate its use
- call and make an appointment with your physician or a counsellor who is experienced in working with patients with phobias and anxiety
- if possible, see any counsellor for support, tips, advice, desensitization, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
- Visit the following website for a short video on how to overcome anxiety related to wearing a mask: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxyvIU7Kiks&feature=youtu.be>
- If you are in an indoor public space, be sure to adhere to all other public health measures, such as maintaining a 2 meter distance between yourself and anyone not in your social bubble.

Research and evidence relating to the transmission and management of COVID19 continues to evolve. As guidelines from reputable health authorities, public health departments and professional societies are published, so too may our recommendations. We are committed to keeping our communities safe and healthy to the best of our abilities.

****Thank you for your understanding, your patience and your compassion****

This document has been endorsed by:

Alexandra Marine and General Hospital
Bluewater and Area Family Health Team
Clinton Family Health Team
Consult Kids Stratford
Exeter Family Health Organization
Grand Bend Area Community Health Centre
Happy Valley Family Health Team
Huron Community Family Health Team
Huron Perth Healthcare Alliance

Listowel Wingham Hospitals Alliance
Huron Perth Public Health
Mitchell Family Doctors
North Huron Family Health Team
North Perth Family Health Team
South Huron Hospital Association
STAR Family Health Team
Stratford Family Health Team

References:

1. Canadian Thoracic Society recommendations regarding the use of face masks by the public during the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic June 2, 2020
2. Lung Association: Non-Medical Face Masks and COVID-19 www.lung.ca/covid19
3. Joint Statement on Importance of Patients with Chronic Lung Disease Wearing Facial Coverings During COVID 19 Pandemic (this is a joint statement by the American College of Chest Physicians, the American Lung Association, the American Thoracic Society and the COPD Foundation) July 17, 2020