

## Universal Masking Recommendations

The New Vision Family Health Team believes in providing the best care to our patients. 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 COVID-19 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).

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 our office to discuss the issue with your family physician. We strongly advise people who are exempt from wearing a face covering to avoid all indoor public spaces.

Please Note:

- ASTHMA and COPD (including chronic bronchitis and emphysema) are NOT contraindications to mask wearing; in fact, having asthma or COPD may put you at HIGHER risk of complications from COVID-19 and make wearing a mask that much more important
- 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 our 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 breathing problem is a compelling reason to wear a mask, rather than be exempt from wearing one. As such, we will not be providing exemptions to patients 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
- See any counsellor for support, tips, advice, desensitization, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
- Avoid public indoor spaces and any circumstances in which physical distancing is not possible.

Research and evidence relating to the transmission and management of COVID-19 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.