



TILBURY DISTRICT FAMILY HEALTH TEAM
POSITION STATEMENT ON MASK EXEMPTIONS
SEPTEMBER 15, 2020

We, the staff and providers of the TDFHT, believe in providing the best care to our community. In light of the new universal masking recommendations, current evidence for masking during COVID-19 outweighs any theoretical risks.

The TDFHT is fully advocating for masking, in addition to maintaining a 2-meter physical distance at all times and diligent frequent handwashing (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
- 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 who are 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 Disabilities Act (that would pertain to wearing a face covering i.e. immobilization in a wheelchair would not qualify)

If you believe, based on the above criteria, that you warrant an exemption, or if you want to discuss your concerns with your primary care provider. Please call the TDFHT for a virtual appointment 519-682-2307.

We strongly advise people who are exempt from wearing a face covering to avoid all indoor public spaces.

PLEASE NOTE:

- Asthma is NOT a contraindication to mask wearing
- COPD (including chronic bronchitis and emphysema) is NOT a contraindication to mask wearing
- 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 the ability to continue to wear oxygen and it does not lower oxygen levels.

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Masks with exhalation valves should NOT be used because they allow infectious respiratory droplets to spread outside the mask and therefore does not protect others from COVID-19 and does not limit the spread of the virus. As such, patients presenting to our centre 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.)*

Individuals with chronic pulmonary illnesses such as asthma and COPD are at higher risk for severe disease with 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 MASK AND THE FEELING OF ANXIETY OR DIFFICULTY BREATHING WITH A FACEMASK:

Wearing a facemask may create feelings of anxiety and panic (including shortness of breath, which is a symptom of anxiety). If you cannot tolerate wearing a facemask 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 increase the duration of wear at home until you can tolerate its use
- Discuss with your provider options for counselling services to address phobias and anxieties; support, tips, advice, etc.
- If all else fails, avoid public indoor spaces and any circumstances in which physical distancing is not possible.

**From the staff and providers of the TDFHT,
thank you for your understanding and patience as we continue
to navigate safely through these unprecedented times.**

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 the 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.