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## Requests for Exemption Letters Mask Policy September 1, 2020

Evaluation of the current available evidence and the statements by the Canadian Thoracic Society suggest that the evidence for masking during COVID-19 outweighs any theoretical risk of wearing a mask. As such physicians advocate for universal masking, in addition to maintaining a 2 metre physical distance at all times when possible. Inappropriate mask-wearing exemptions have the potential to hasten the spread of the novel coronavirus in our community.

Please note that asthma is not a contraindication to wearing a mask. COPD including emphysema is not a contraindication to mask wearing. Discomfort caused by the mask is not an exemption, nor is acne caused by the mask an exemption.

The Canadian Thoracic Society (the professional society that provides asthma and COPD guidelines for physicians and patients) has stated that there is no evidence that wearing a face mask will exacerbate an underlying lung condition. 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 might be a compelling reason to wear a mask (and avoid places where one is required), rather than be exempt from wearing one.

The law does not require you to possess documentation from a physician if you believe you are exempt from wearing a mask. Moreover, physicians cannot make a determination of exemption because there is no guidance on how to do this.

Despite this information if you feel that you cannot tolerate wearing a face mask you may choose to see a counsellor for support, tips, and other advice, to manage the anxiety that wearing a mask may cause you. If you are not wearing a mask you should avoid public indoor spaces and circumstances in which physical distancing is not possible, or use a mask alternative like a face shield.

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## ADDRESSING PATIENT CONCERNS REGARDING THE CANADIAN THORACIC SOCIETY POSITION STATEMENT ON USE OF FACE MASKS BY THE PUBLIC DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Balancing concerns for both personal and public safety has been the preoccupation of the Canadian Thoracic Society (CTS) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 is a new virus that is affecting people all over the world. On a daily basis, we are learning more about the virus, its transmission, its effects, and treatment options. In respect of the fact that currently there is no vaccine for the virus, and that consistently effective treatments remain elusive, strong public health measures remain our best defence both individually and as a society. When physical distancing cannot be maintained, the use of face masks is an important part of the public health strategy.

As respiratory health experts, we have a strong understanding of what our patients experience when living with an underlying lung condition, and the impact that this can have on people's lives. Our recommendations for the treatment of lung diseases are guided by published scientific studies, in order to help our patients to live longer and to have the best possible outcomes. Similarly, in developing our position statement on the use of face masks, we reviewed the available scientific studies on the impact of the use of face masks on COVID-19 transmission and balanced this information against our knowledge of the physical and functional effects of wearing a face mask, particularly for people with underlying lung conditions. We used all of this information to reach the most informed recommendations on this topic during the pandemic, while also considering the fact that patients with severe lung disease are the ones who are most susceptible to severe COVID-19 infection and therefore the ones for whom broad use of face masks is most important. Accordingly, our advice to all citizens, including patients with underlying lung disease, is to wear a face mask in situations where physical distancing cannot be maintained.

We recognize that wearing a face mask may not be possible for some people, but their lung disease should rarely be the cause of this. Despite your best efforts, if you cannot wear a face mask consider using alternatives to face masks as recommended by the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) or the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (such as face shields) or avoiding circumstances where physical distancing is not possible.

Ultimately, individuals are free to make decisions for themselves, as long as they maintain compliance with rules set by their local public health units.

The CTS remains very concerned about the spread of COVID-19, particularly to people with underlying lung conditions, and we will continue to review the scientific evidence on a regular basis and update our recommendations as needed.

## Canadian Thoracic Society recommendations regarding the use of face masks by the public during the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic

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### Summary

- We support the Public Health Agency of Canada's recommendation of wearing a non-medical face mask in the community for periods of time when it is not possible to consistently maintain a 2-meter physical distance from others.
- We recommend that all individuals with underlying lung disease follow this recommendation to reduce the risk of spreading the SARS-CoV-2 virus.
- If individuals cannot tolerate wearing this added protection, we recommend that they avoid or minimize circumstances in which physical distancing is not possible.
- There is NO evidence that wearing a face mask will exacerbate (cause a 'flare up' of) an underlying lung condition.
- We recommend that anyone who uses a face mask familiarize themselves with how to properly put on and take off this equipment.
- It is important that if one is wearing a mask, it should be comfortable and not require frequent adjustment to avoid contaminating the wearer's hands.
- We remind everyone that wearing a face mask alone will not prevent the spread of COVID-19 and that use of face masks should complement other recommended public health measures, including frequent hand washing or use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers, and physical distancing.
- The COVID-19 pandemic is a rapidly evolving situation and recommendations may change as the science informs us. We recommend to routinely visit our COVID-19 website for updates at <https://cts-sct.ca/covid-19>.

### Background

As Canada begins to relax the measures instituted to limit the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, recommendations by the Public Health Agency of Canada and local public health authorities are simultaneously evolving to assist in this process.

The Public Health Agency of Canada has recommended the use of non-medical/facial coverings in the community when physical distancing from others is not possible.<sup>1</sup> This recommendation includes individuals with any underlying lung disease. This new recommendation is primarily designed to help reduce the asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic spread of the virus. Asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus has been previously reported<sup>2-5</sup> and is believed to be an important mode of viral transmission. As we transition into a more interactive and open society, the risk of asymptomatic spread increases. The use of facial coverings could reduce the risk of viral transmission, as has been suggested with other viruses.<sup>6-8</sup> We recommend that people also refer to their local health authorities' suggestions on wearing masks as this may vary depending on local community transmission rates.

It is important to highlight that the recommendation is for the use of non-medical/facial coverings, as medical grade masks should be conserved for use in acute care settings where there is the highest risk of potential transmission. It is also important to remind the public that although there is evidence that medical grade surgical face masks reduce viral spread,<sup>9</sup> non-medical/facial coverings may not confer the same level of protection.<sup>10</sup> However, face masks are more effective when combined with careful hand hygiene.<sup>11,12</sup> Hence, whether a face mask is used or not, all citizens should continue to practice proper hand hygiene in the form of frequent hand washing or use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers and follow public health recommendations regarding physical distancing.

Anyone who chooses to use a face mask should use one that is comfortable and does not require frequent adjustments. Also, one must familiarize themselves with the proper process of putting on ("donning") and taking off ("doffing") the mask. We ask that you refer to the Public Health Agency of Canada's website<sup>13</sup> for instructions on this and links to a tutorial video and resources available on the Canadian Thoracic Society (CTS) website (<https://cts-sct.ca/>)

covid-19). These steps are crucial in order to reduce one's risk of accidental contamination leading to virus exposure.

Breathing through a mask takes more effort, and this may vary depending on whether one is using a commercially produced mask, a mask made at home, or a simple cloth covering. For those with underlying lung disease, the effort required may cause a feeling of shortness of breath while wearing the mask. In such situations, we recommend that individuals remove the face mask, and if symptoms do not immediately settle, they should follow their existing strategy for relief of acute symptoms. These symptoms should be self-limited and respond to immediate interventions. **There is no evidence that wearing a mask/facial covering will lead to prolonged symptoms or a flare up ("exacerbation") of an underlying lung condition.** If an individual experiences challenges with wearing a mask, we recommend that they speak with their health care provider to develop strategies in order to be able to use this added form of protection. However, if wearing a face mask is not possible despite best efforts, we recommend that individuals instead avoid or minimize circumstances where physical distancing is not possible.

We will continue to update these recommendations as scientific evidence and government policy evolve.<sup>14</sup> Health care professionals are advised to periodically visit the CTS website (<https://cts-sct.ca/covid-19>) for additional resources as well as further updates on COVID-19 and lung diseases.

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