

# CFFM Statement on Face Masks and Exemptions

We, the physicians of The Centre for Family Medicine, believe in providing the best care to our community. In light of the new Region of Waterloo mandatory face covering by-law, and multiple phone calls from concerned patients 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 the universal masking, in addition to maintaining 2m physical distance at all times and diligent frequent hand washing (or the use of 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 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 face coverings and cannot be persuaded to
- People with PTSD who are triggered by 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 mask covering for who wearing a face covering will cause severe stress or disorganization
- People unable to apply or remove face covering without help
- People with accommodations under the Ontario Human Rights Code of *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)

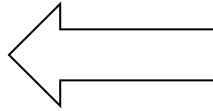
If you believe, based upon the above criteria, that you warrant an exemption, or if you want to discuss your concerns with your physician, please call the clinic for a virtual appointment.

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

## 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 the nasal cannula. It does not impair their ability to continue to wear their oxygen, nor lower their oxygen levels.

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 clinics with masks with exhalation valves will not be permitted in without changing their mask to a face covering without an exhalation valve.**



**Mask with Exhalation Valve**

Patients with Respiratory Illness 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 physician and patients).

Individuals with chronic pulmonary illness 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 of Difficulty Breathing with a Facemask:

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 facemask due to these symptoms, it is advised that you:

- Try different mask formats and materials to find one that 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 one of our counsellors who are experienced in working with patients with phobias and anxiety
- See any counsellor for support, tips, advice, desensitisation, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
- If all else fails, avoid public indoor spaces and any circumstance in which physical distancing is not possible.

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

The Physicians of The Centre for Family Medicine Family Health Team

References:

1. Region of Waterloo Face Covering By-Law (<https://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/face-covering-by-law.aspx>)
2. Canadian Thoracic Society recommendations regarding the use of face masks by the public during the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic - June 2, 2020.
3. Lung Association: Non-Medical Face Masks and COVID-19 ([www.lung.ca/covid19](http://www.lung.ca/covid19))
4. 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)