

August 18, 2020

## An Open Letter to Patients

On July 30, 2020, Southwestern Public Health's Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Joyce Lock, issued a [Letter of Instruction](#) mandating the wearing of non-medical face coverings in enclosed public spaces. Examples of a face covering are cloth masks, bandanas, or scarves that cover the mouth, nose and chin without gaping. Our health team fully supports this public health measure in addition to physical distancing and handwashing protocols.

While medical exemptions are allowed in the Letter of Instruction, inappropriate medical exemptions have the potential to inadvertently hasten the spread of COVID-19 in our community. Appropriate medical exemptions include:

- People, especially children, with Severe Sensory Processing Disorders
- People with facial deformities incompatible with face coverings
- Children under 2 years of age
- Children under 5 years of age who refuse to wear a face covering and cannot be persuaded to
- People with PTSD triggered by a face covering (pre-dating COVID-19)
- People with extreme Agoraphobia/Asphyxia phobia (pre-dating COVID-19)
- People with Cognitive Impairment, Intellectual Disability, or Autism Spectrum Disorder who will be distressed or disorganized by wearing a face covering
- People unable to apply or remove a face covering without help

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

### Non-Exemptions

- Asthma and COPD are not contraindications to face covering wearing. The Canadian Thoracic Society states [there is no evidence](#) that wearing a face covering will exacerbate underlying lung conditions.
- Acne caused by a face covering is not an exemption.
- Discomfort caused by a face covering is not an exemption.
- People wearing oxygen can wear a face covering over their nasal cannula. It does not impair their ability to continue to wear their oxygen, nor lower their oxygen levels.
- People who wear glasses may benefit from washing their glasses in soapy water to prevent fogging.

### Mask Anxiety

Most Ontarians are not familiar with wearing a face covering, and they may cause feelings of anxiety and panic (including shortness of breath, which is a symptom of anxiety) in new wearers. The most effective treatment for anxiety is graded exposure.

Refer to [bouncebackontario.ca](https://bouncebackontario.ca) for more support and free Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for people 15 years or older. A resource follows that outlines excellent advice for easing face covering anxiety.

Thank you for doing all you are doing to contain the spread of COVID-19 in our communities.

Sincerely,  
Your Physicians and Nurse Practitioners

# 5 ways to overcome mask anxiety.



1

**Five quality breaths.**



A quality breath is a 4 second inhale through the nose, 2 second pause and 6 second exhale through the mouth. Take five before putting on your mask.

2

**Gradual practice.**



Practice wearing your face covering at home; gradually increasing the length of wear. Remind yourself, "You are safe. You are breathing."

3

**Control timing and location.**



Take breaks. Find spaces and times when you can be mask free. Choose virtual appointments and online shopping when possible.

4

**Find the right mask.**



There are many quality face coverings to choose from. Thick, thin, paper, cloth, patterned or plain. Find the one that is right for you.

5

**Focus on your reason.**



Focus on your reason for wearing a face covering. Doing something for the greater good is great motivation. No one is 100% comfortable.