

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 homemade non-medical face mask in the community for periods of time when it is not possible to consistently maintain a 2-metre physical distance from others.
- We recommend that all patients with underlying lung disease follow this recommendation to reduce the risk of spreading the SARS-CoV-2 virus.
- If patients 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.¹ This recommendation includes patients 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 reported²⁻⁵ 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 viruses⁶⁻⁸. 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 spread⁹, non-medical/facial coverings may not confer the same level of protection.¹⁰ However, face masks are more effective when combined with careful hand hygiene.^{11,12} 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 following 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 website¹³ 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 patients 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 a patient 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 facemask is not possible despite best efforts, we recommend that patients instead avoid or minimize circumstances where physical distancing is not possible.

We will continue to update these recommendations as scientific evidence and government policy evolve¹⁴. 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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