



Considerations for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Individuals Regarding the Use of Face Masks and Coverings

Background

Governor Murphy's Executive Order No. 163 requires individuals to wear face coverings in outdoor public spaces when it is not possible to socially distance and keep a six-foot distance from others, except where doing so would inhibit that individual's health, where the individual is under two years of age, or in situations where individuals cannot feasibly wear a face covering, such as when eating or drinking at outdoor dining areas.

The Order also reiterates New Jersey's policy of requiring face coverings in indoor spaces that are accessible to members of the public, such as retail, recreational, and entertainment businesses, areas of government buildings open to the public, and mass transit buses, trains, and stations, again with exceptions for health reasons and children under two.¹

Importance of face masks or coverings

Face masks or other type of face coverings are recommended as a simple barrier to help prevent respiratory droplets from traveling into the air and onto other people when the person wearing the mask or other face covering coughs, sneezes, talks, or raises their voice. This recommendation is based on what we know about the role respiratory droplets play in the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19, and the effectiveness of face coverings to reduce the spray of droplets when worn over the nose and mouth. COVID-19 spreads mainly among people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet), so the use of masks or other face coverings is particularly important in settings where people are close to each other or where social distancing is difficult to maintain.²

Face masks and coverings and people with disabilities

The use of masks may be more challenging for some people with disabilities, particularly for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, because masks muffle speech as well as eliminate access to lip reading and visual cues as an effective form of communication. In some settings, such as healthcare and education, the need for effective communication is critical and it is important for service providers to adapt ways that allows for effective communication in a safe manner. Acknowledgement, flexibility, and support for people with disabilities and special health needs is critical during the COVID-19 pandemic.³

CDC recognizes that wearing masks or other face coverings may not be possible in every situation or for some people. In some situations, wearing a mask or face covering may exacerbate a physical or mental health condition, lead to a medical emergency, or introduce significant safety concerns. Adaptations and alternatives should be considered whenever possible to increase the feasibility of wearing a cloth face covering or to reduce

the risk of COVID-19 spreading if it is not possible to wear one. For example, the CDC recognizes that people who are deaf or hard of hearing—or those who care for or interact with a person with hearing loss—may be unable to wear a mask or other type of face covering if they rely on lipreading and/or visual cues to communicate. In this situation, consider using a clear face covering if available.⁴

Clear masks with a clear plastic panel

Clear masks or cloth masks with a clear plastic panel are an alternative type of mask for people who interact with:

- People who are deaf or hard of hearing
- Young children or students learning to read
- Students learning a new language
- People with disabilities
- People who need to see the proper shape of the mouth for making appropriate vowel sounds (for example, when singing)

If you use this type of mask, make sure

- You can breathe easily
- Excess moisture does not collect on the inside of the mask
- You remove the mask before sleeping, since the plastic part could form a seal around your mouth and nose and make it hard to breathe

Clear face coverings should cover both the nose and the mouth, and ideally not have any cloth impeding the view of the lips and surrounding areas of the mouth. If a clear face covering is not available, consider whether you can use written communication, speech-to-text apps, internet-based platforms for virtual meetings, telephonic communications, or decrease background noise to make communication possible while wearing a cloth face covering that blocks your lips.⁵ See the NJ Division of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing's Communication Access Tips During COVID-19 for specific resources on communication access⁶.

If someone near you is not wearing a mask

There are people who may not be able to wear face coverings for a variety of reasons and you may not be able to tell why just by looking at a person. Unless you are a business responsible for ensuring worker and customer compliance with masking requirements, do not confront a person about why they are not wearing a face covering but instead, if possible, ask them to maintain social distance. People who are deaf or hard of hearing may request others to remove their mask, if both parties are able to maintain a safe social distance of 6 feet.⁷

Face coverings protect others from you so the best option is for you to continue to wear your face covering and, where possible, physically distance yourself at least six feet from persons not wearing face coverings. Remember, we are all in this together and not everyone is able to wear a face covering.

For more information on COVID-19 resources for deaf and hard of hearing individuals, please go to: <https://nj.gov/humanservices/ddhh/coronavirus.shtml>

Resources

<https://nj.gov/humanservices/ddhh/coronavirus.shtml>

<https://nj.gov/humanservices/ddhh/assets/documents/DDHH%20Communication%20Tips%20-%20CoVid-0420.pdf>

References

¹ <https://nj.gov/infobank/eo/056murphy/pdf/EO-163.pdf>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover-guidance.html>

³ <https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/guidemasks.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover-guidance.html>

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover-guidance.html>

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<https://nj.gov/humanservices/ddhh/assets/documents/DDHH%20Communication%20Tips%20-%20CoVid-0420.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/guidemasks.pdf>