

Face Masks

There has been an increasing number of patients presenting with queries and concerns regarding using face masks. Some have worn them incorrectly, while others have questioned their purpose altogether.

There are two types of masks available to the community – [disposable and cloth masks](#).

We encourage patients to purchase or make the proper masks according to the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS] [guidelines](#). Cloth masks can be washed in hot water and detergent, as it is [well known](#) that hot water above 56°C can kill the virus.

Pharmacies and post-offices are good places to buy masks, as many sold on the internet may not be appropriate. P2 masks should not be used because they are difficult to take on and off without contaminating hands, are expensive and not as accessible.

Cloth masks must have three layers of closely woven fabric [cotton on the inside, cotton blend in the middle and polyester outer layer] and fit snugly around the patient's face. Care is required when removing the masks to avoid touching the outer and inner surface of the mask.

We encourage patients to use [cloth masks](#) because they are recyclable and better for the environment than disposable masks.

Just to reinforce that when we go out to public areas for the [four reasons](#) allowed during lockdown, wearing a mask is mandatory in Victoria even if we feel or appear to be well.

Some patients ask why they need to wear a mask if they are feeling well, the reason is that up to 80% of people who have contracted coronavirus either show no symptoms or mild respiratory symptoms, like a mild flu, posing a real danger to those with chronic diseases and other high-risk groups for whom the virus is a major threat.

If we all wear masks we are protecting ourselves and others – being well can be deceptive, as people can be harbouring the COVID-19 virus or infection and not know it, unwittingly spreading the virus.

We should also remember that face masks are not a replacement for physical distancing, rigorous hand hygiene, or sneeze and cough etiquette. In addition, if anyone has respiratory symptoms, no matter how mild, they must stay home, not go to work or school and get tested for COVID-19.

If we become unwell and live with other people, a mask worn in communal areas such as the kitchen may help.

It's important to know [how to put masks on and take them off](#) carefully to avoid hand contamination. Instructions are available on government websites.

While most patients are now open to wearing masks following the latest Government announcements, some patients find them ‘suffocating’ and difficult to wear for long periods of time. This can be assisted by minimising time in public spaces where face mask wearing is mandatory and maintaining social distancing which is required during the current lock down.

The real challenge is in certain work environments. At our clinic, for example, where physical distancing is not always possible, [all our staff are required to wear masks](#) and we also separate ourselves to have our lunches.

As we are a public space, wearing a face mask into our medical centre is mandatory. Patients have the option to have a phone consultation with the doctors especially if they have any respiratory symptoms or if they wish to avoid face mask wearing to attend appointments. However, this may not be practical for certain medical situations but our staff can advise on appropriate appointment arrangements.

Some patients have requested medical exemptions from wearing a mask. As it is a legal requirement, we will not advise against wearing masks, and as well, we must consider the vulnerable groups at high risk of catching COVID-19.

It is also important that we reassure patients asking for an exemption that it is vital now for everyone in the community to be dynamic and make short-term sacrifices for long-term community health gain.

However, we do understand that for some patients wearing face masks is challenging and so we will try to explore other ways to meet the current requirements.

For example, if face mask wearing creates a claustrophobic or anxious feeling, we can advise to modify a cloth mask so that it’s loose and comfortable, or modify a scarf. That is actually permissible – you’re allowed to wear a scarf around the mouth and nose, but still make it a very light mask with three layers.

There may be other reasons why you might feel you can’t wear a mask, but whatever it might be, it’s important that we try to work with you to modify the protective clothing or mask for your benefit and the community as a whole.

Of course, we empathise with those who may experience anxiety and/or claustrophobia from wearing a mask.

However, it’s also imperative to consider the anxiety experienced by people in our community when we see people who aren’t wearing a mask. It’s a very stressful time for frontline healthcare providers and immunocompromised people particularly.

Wearing a mask should not be connotative of ‘fear’ and ‘COVID-19 conspiracy’, but a symbol of compassion and union to keep our communities protected and healthy.

Lawful excuses or exceptions for not wearing a face covering

A face covering is not required in the following circumstances:

- *Infants and children under the age of 12 years*
- *A person who is affected by a relevant medical condition – including problems with their breathing, a serious skin condition on the face, a disability or a mental health condition. This also includes persons who are communicating with a person who is hearing impaired, where the ability to see the mouth is essential for communication.*
- *Persons for whom wearing a face covering would create a risk to that person's health and safety related to their work, as determined through OH&S guidelines.*
- *Persons whose professions require clear enunciation or visibility of their mouth. This includes teaching or live broadcasting.*

More information, including further lawful excuses or exceptions, is available on the [DHHS website](#).