

Wearing a face covering can stop the spread of coronavirus.

This information sheet looks at ways to support autistic people to wear face masks and what you can do if you or the person you support is unable to wear a mask.

The Law says that people should wear face coverings in shops, on public transport and in some other enclosed spaces. The Government also strongly encourages people to wear face coverings where social distancing may be difficult and where you come into contact with people you do not normally meet.

Some autistic people find wearing face coverings difficult or cannot tolerate them at all. There may be sensory reasons; it may feel too hot, too itchy, too tight, or tickly. The way it feels against the face or touching the ears may feel painful. It may cause breathing difficulties as breathing through a face mask changes the feeling of airflow, this can feel like suffocation leading to increased anxiety. For some autistic people it may feel strange and new and the way they look in the mirror may be unsettling. There are also challenges to social communication as reading facial expressions under a face mask is more difficult than usual. With most of the face covered, the eyes become the focus, making it even harder for those who struggle with eye contact.

Some autistic people may never be able to tolerate these sensations and new experiences but for others they may be able to increase tolerance with preparation and practice.

Getting used to wearing a face mask or covering

Each face mask feels different, some are tight against the face, others like those used for DIY, sit off the mouth and nose more. It is worth trying a few to find out what is right for you.

There are lots of websites and video clips on the internet with tips of how to make your own face mask. If you make your own or ask someone to make one for you, you can use an old T shirt that has familiar textures and smells. Or you can personalise it with fabric with your or your child's specialist interest. If the loops over the ears are uncomfortable sewing buttons on a hat or hair band can help.

If you can tolerate fragrances then adding a familiar smell may help. If using washable masks you may want to put them inside your clothing for a while after washing to reduce the new laundry smell. Chewing gum or sucking sweets while wearing a mask can also provide distraction and mask smells.

Once you have found the right mask for you, make sure you have a few of the same design. They may feel different when they are hot and damp from your breath so changing them often can help.

Wearing face masks is an important way to stop the spread of coronavirus, so spending time getting used to wearing one can help to protect you and others around you. Start by wearing it at home and getting used to the way you look by looking in the mirror. Wearing it for short periods at first and then increasing the time can help build up tolerance.

If you or your child are unable to wear a face covering

Some autistic people will never be able to tolerate the sensations of face masks. As a result there are important exemptions in place for those who are unable to put on and wear a face covering due to:

- a physical or mental illness or impairment, or disability
- if it will cause you severe distress
- to avoid harm or injury to you or others

Children under the age of 11 are not required to wear face coverings and Public Health England say children under 3 years old should not wear them for safety reasons.

You do not need to prove you are autistic to be exempt but there are many downloadable cards that you can carry that can be helpful if you are challenged. There are links to these at the end of this information sheet.

Removing your face covering in shops and banks

If you wear a face covering, there may be times when you are asked to remove it in enclosed places. This could be in a bank or post office for identification or in shops when buying age-restricted products like alcohol.

Resources

The Government guidance about face masks changes from time to time but the up to date version can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own>

The following websites have exemption cards you can download or photograph on your phone.

https://www.networkwestmidlands.com/media/3407/wmn_facemask_exemption_printathome_v2.pdf

<https://www.civicmc.nhs.uk/files/2020/06/Face-Covering-Exemption-Cards.pdf>

<https://hiddendisabilitiesstore.com/hidden-disabilities-face-covering.html>