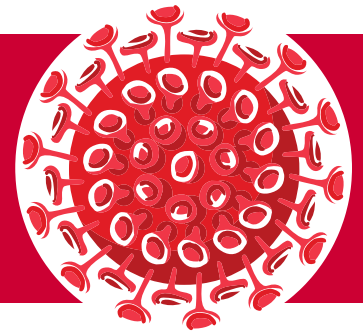


HELPING ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES BECOME COMFORTABLE WITH FACE MASKS



Face masks are an essential and necessary defense in preventing the spread of COVID-19. Some adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities may not understand why they and others need to wear them, or may have fear, anxiety, or sensory challenges that impact mask wearing. This resource provides strategies supporters can use to help adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities become more comfortable with face masks.

HELP PEOPLE FIND THE FACE MASK THAT WILL WORK BEST FOR THEM

There are many different types of masks. Help people maximize their comfort wearing a mask by finding which type will work best for them. Supporters should consider sensory challenges, such as sensitivity to touch and texture, when helping people select a mask.

Surgical Masks

- Flat face masks with ear loops and a rectangular covering which expands to fit around the nose and mouth
- Disposable and should be discarded after one use

Fabric Masks

- Can be made homemade with personalized designs or purchased with a design the person chooses
- Can be washed and reused
- Can have either elastic ear loops, tie-backs, or be gaiter neck

Face Masks with Windows for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing

- Fabric mask with a clear, plastic window covering the mouth



Surgical Masks



Fabric Masks



Fabric Masks with Window

TIPS FOR MAKING MASKS MORE COMFORTABLE:

- Fabric masks made of natural fibers like cotton are gentler for sensitive skin
- Consider a mask that ties around the head if ear loops are irritating
- If using a mask with ear loops, try sewing buttons on the side of a headband or hat to anchor them
- Try a neck gaiter face mask which covers the nose, mouth, and neck like a scarf without ear loops or tie-backs
- For those who wear glasses, make sure glasses are cleaned daily and fit snugly against nose and cheeks to prevent fogging
- Taping the edge or adding a tissue underneath can create a tighter seal

More tips on making masks more comfortable and accessible can be found in these articles:

- *Face masks hurting your ears? These easy solutions can help* (Today): <https://www.today.com/style/how-make-face-mask-more-comfortable-ears-t180954>
- *4 Essential Face Mask Hacks You Need to Know if You Wear Glasses* (Better Homes & Gardens): <https://www.bhg.com/news/face-mask-glasses-hacks/>
- *For the deaf or hard of hearing, face masks pose new challenge* (CNN): <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/02/opinions/deaf-hard-of-hearing-face-masks-brooks/index.html>



HELP PEOPLE GET USED TO FACE MASKS

We become less sensitive to certain anxiety triggers by controlling when and how we encounter them.

Desensitization is a method for helping with anxiety or discomfort around a certain place, activity, or object. For example: going to the doctor, riding a Ferris wheel, getting a haircut, or even wearing a face mask.

When a stressful event or item makes someone anxious, supporters can help the person become gradually more familiar or “get used to” it very slowly, while maintaining comfort and control. It may be uncomfortable or stressful to wear a face mask, so reducing anxiety through desensitization may help some people become more comfortable.

Page 3 contains **steps supporters can take to help people with developmental disabilities get used to face masks.**

Steps Supporters Can Take to Help People Get Used to Face Masks

1 Provide information to reduce uncertainty:

- Help people understand why it's important using visual aids, social stories, comic strips, and other available resources
- Find out what is most uncomfortable for them about the mask and address it

1



2 Establish comfort at a distance:

- Show people others wearing masks, on videos, in pictures
- Include people that the person trusts and values in demonstration

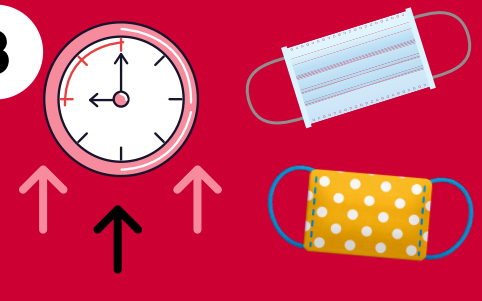
2



3 Gradually increase exposure:

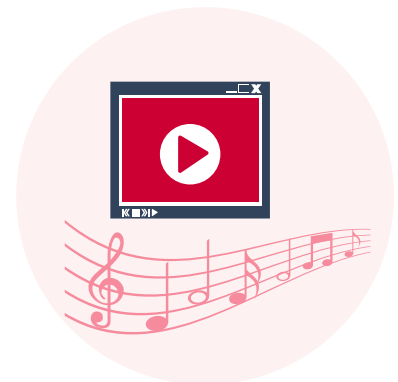
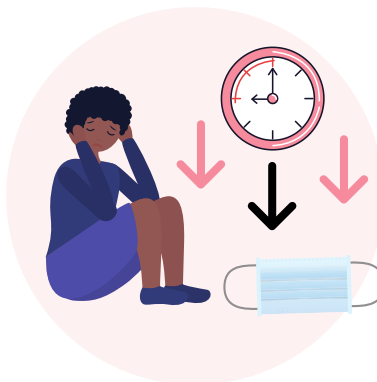
- Introduce wearing the mask in small increments, when the person is calm and comfortable
- Invite the person to use a mirror to practice taking the mask on/off properly
- Increase time spent showing/wearing the mask by using concrete time frames to guide how long to wear the mask (e.g.: for the time it takes to go to the mailbox/to walk around the block, to make a cup of coffee/while we cook) breakfast, listen to a song/for one episode of your favorite show)

3



At each step, maintain comfort:

- Practice when the person is calm
- Help the person have control by designing a custom mask or establishing a signal to communicate when they are feeling uncomfortable
- If there are any signs of anxiety, reduce time spent with the mask and build in relaxation strategies at each step. Practice with the person when he or she is not feeling stressed and provide prompts as needed. Include videos or songs in rehearsal that can be used later when the person is anxious.



If someone is uncomfortable seeing others wearing face masks or stressed about not being able to recognize friends, family, or staff wearing masks, supporters can:

Validate emotions:

- Confirm that it can be uncomfortable to wear a mask and not see others
- Distract the person to a less stressful topic after recognizing their feelings

Find creative ways to help recognize staff and friends:

- For example, identifying yourself by name when you enter a room or adding a favorite baseball cap or another accessory to your appearance that reflects your individuality

Help the person develop relaxation strategies:

- Find strategies effective in distracting from the cause of the anxiety that help to focus on an alternative activity or behavior
- Invite people to participate in a combination of deep breathing and counting if they are feeling anxious
- Playing soothing music or a guided meditation



Preparation of this document was supported by the NJ Department of Human Services, Division of Developmental Disabilities (Contract #04ME20C).
June, 2020

RUTGERS

Robert Wood Johnson
Medical School

The Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities
Department of Pediatrics
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
Liberty Plaza, 335 George Street
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

rwjms.rutgers.edu/boggscenter
p. 732-235-9300
f. 732-235-9330

Looking for a social story to help someone you support become comfortable with face masks?

Check out The Boggs Center's *Wearing a Mask: A COVID-19 Social Story for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*:

<http://rwjms.rutgers.edu/boggscenter/links/documents/FaceMaskSocialStoryAdultswIDD-F.pdf>