

September 2020

To: Spokane County School District Superintendents, Administrators and Nurses
From: RB Lutz, Spokane County Health Officer

Pursuant to RCW 70.05.070 (1)(3)(9), the purpose of this guidance is to assist K-12 schools being asked to provide mask medical exemptions to students.

Background

The Washington State Department of Health (DOH), American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), and Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) have published guidance on the use of face coverings for youth.

The AAP states, *Cloth face coverings can be safely worn by all children 2 years of age and older, including the vast majority of children with underlying health conditions, with rare exception.*

These rare exceptions include, but are not limited to, children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and mental health conditions or other sensory sensitivities such as autism spectrum disorder, who may have a hard time tolerating a face covering. (In such situations, special precautions may be needed.) Additionally, children who are considered high-risk or severely immunocompromised (e.g., cystic fibrosis, cancer) should wear a medical mask in consultation with their healthcare providers.

Medical experts state that children with chronic conditions, like asthma, are not at heightened risk from wearing a mask unless they are in active respiratory distress. Children with other underlying cardiorespiratory issues or medical conditions should seek medical guidance and use a risk-based approach. The CDC notes, *cloth face coverings should not be placed on young children under age 2, anyone who has trouble breathing, or is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance.*

DOH Secretary of Health John Wiesman issued ORDER 20-0320-03.1 Face Coverings -Statewide, effective July 25, 2020. It states, *Every person in Washington State must wear a face covering that covers their nose and mouth when they are outside of their house, mobile home, apartment, condominium, hotel or motel room, or other dwelling unit, subject to the exceptions [set forth in the Order]*. A copy of Order 20-0320-03.1 is linked below. The exceptions set forth in Order 20-0320-03.1 are consistent with those identified by the AAP.

DOH also issued **K-12 Schools – Fall 2020-2021 Guidance (revised September 2, 2020)** regarding face coverings. It states, *Cloth face coverings should not be worn by:*

- *Those with a disability that prevents them from comfortably wearing or removing a face covering;*
- *Those with certain respiratory conditions or trouble breathing;*
- *Those who are deaf or hard of hearing, and those who provide instruction to such people, and use facial and mouth movements as part of communication; and*
- *Those advised by a medical, legal, or behavioral health professional that wearing a face covering may pose a risk to that person.*

In rare circumstances when a cloth face covering cannot be worn, students and staff may use a clear face covering or a face shield with a drape as an alternative to a cloth face

covering. If used, face shields should extend below the chin, to the ears, and have no gap at the forehead.

Conclusion

The evidence supporting the safety and benefits of wearing face coverings to reduce COVID-19 is significant for children over the age of 2. Additionally, the **DOH K-12 Schools – Fall 2020-2021 Guidance** further identifies the use of a clear face covering or a face shield with drape as an alternative.

Therefore, medical exemptions for cloth face masks and/or face shields with drapes should only be considered by for Spokane County K-12 students for in-person instruction as follows:

- Children with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities
- Children with behavioral health conditions or other sensory sensitivities, such as autism spectrum disorder
- Children considered high-risk by their healthcare provider due to cystic fibrosis, cancer or other immunocompromised state

Schools should consider these exceptions on a case-by-case basis. If it is determined the student is unable to safely wear a mask and is unable to wear a face shield, then remote learning is appropriate unless other considerations exist, such as special education status of the student that precludes remote learning. When a student is unable to participate in in-person instruction, the school should provide appropriate accommodations to ensure her/his education.

In such situation where a medical provider has provided a medical exemption to a student and the provider disagrees with this public health guidance, the case will be handled on an individual basis by the school, in consultation with local public health. Exemptions from the face mask requirements will not be considered or granted based on a religious exemption.

References:

- American Academy of Pediatrics Guidance on Cloth Face Coverings:
<https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/cloth-face-coverings/>
- World Health Organizations Q&A on Children & Masks:
<https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-children-and-masks-related-to-covid-19>
- CDC Cloth Face Covering Guidance – Feasibility & Adaptations:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover-guidance.html#feasibility-adaptations>
- WA Department of Health K-12 Fall 2020-21 Guidance:
<https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/FallGuidanceK-12.pdf>
- Secretary of Health Wiesman’s Order 20-03.1 – Face Coverings:
https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/Secretary_of_Health_Order_20-03_Statewide_Face_Coverings.pdf
- CDC – How to Wear Masks:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-to-wear-cloth-face-coverings.html>