

Guidance for Requests for Exemptions from Cloth Face Mask Use in Schools

- As noted in guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and state and local health departments, cloth face masks are an important tool in preventing the spread of COVID-19. When feasible, and especially in situations where physical distancing cannot be maintained, school-aged children should wear cloth face masks in compliance with school and/or local government requirements.
- Cloth face masks may impede communication and learning opportunities for children with hearing loss, speech delay, or for whom English is not their primary language at home. Mild impediments can often be addressed with adaptations in instructional delivery. Impediments may also be alleviated using face masks with a clear plastic inset (“clear masks”) that allows visualization of the mouth for lip-reading or speech therapy guidance. However, none of these instances warrant a medical exemption for use of a face mask.
- Elementary school students may have more difficulty than older students with keeping a cloth face mask on for extended periods of time and/or avoiding frequent touching of the mask. Schools may choose to use a variety of strategies to provide breaks from wearing a face mask while optimizing physical distancing, such as outdoor classes or cohorting students for recess. Additionally, students of this age are likely to adapt to more consistent face mask use as modeled by adults and peers, and as reinforced through various social mechanisms, such as stories, games, and rewards. Developmental adaptation to wearing a cloth face mask does not justify provision of a medical exemption for the use of a mask.
- Some children with autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, or other cognitive developmental delays may have difficulty tolerating the use of a cloth face mask. Similar difficulties may be experienced by children and adolescents with mental health disorders. While the root causes may be very different, our specialists in developmental and behavioral pediatrics have seen the use of clear masks be very beneficial for many of these children. Families should be encouraged to work with their child’s teachers and school therapists to teach and reinforce mask use before any request for a medical exemption is made.
- Most school districts that have been in contact with CMKC have indicated a willingness to work with families on accommodating their concerns regarding the use of cloth face masks, including providing virtual learning alternatives. It is important to note that, based on current summer school in-person enrollment, the vast majority of families have readily accepted having their children wear cloth face masks while at school. Families should be encouraged to work with their school district to explore appropriate accommodations if they express reservations regarding their child’s use of a cloth face mask in school.
- As noted in AAP and CDC guidance, a child should not wear a cloth face mask if they are unable to remove the mask independently. In limited circumstances, there may exist a physical or intellectual condition that would justify a medical exemption for wearing a cloth face mask in school based on this rationale.
- From a physiologic standpoint, we are unaware of any cardiac or respiratory medical conditions that would prohibit a student from wearing a cloth face mask at school.

Primary Author: George C. Phillips, MD, MBA – Division Director, General Academic Pediatrics

Initial Reviewers:

Christopher Oermann, MD – Division Director, Allergy, Immunology, Pulmonary and Sleep Medicine

Sarah Soden, MD – Division Director, Developmental and Behavioral Sciences

Ahmed Abdelmoity, MD – Division Director, Child Neurology

Rupal Gupta, MD – Medical Director, Operation Breakthrough Clinic

Maggie Wright, MD, MPH – Physician, Beacon Program

Emily Goodwin, MD – Physician, Beacon Program

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