

Ventura County Guidance on Mask Exemptions for Students

Medical experts agree that proper usage of masks/cloth face coverings in conjunction with physical distancing measures are essential to preventing the spread of COVID-19. As schools require children to wear masks, parents may have questions for their pediatricians about special healthcare conditions that might exempt a child from safely wearing a mask.

The following guidance regarding medical mask exemptions for children reflects the consensus of the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Health Officer for Ventura County Public Health. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) strongly encourages effective infection control and prevention procedures including frequent hand washing, physical distancing practices, and use of masks. Plans for reopening school campuses must include universal use of masks by all adults and students 3rd grade and up, and the use of masks strongly encouraged in students below 3rd grade. The AAP supports the use of masks by children 2 years and older, including those with underlying health conditions, with rare exception.

This guidance does not replace conversations between parents and their medical home about the risks and benefits of individual children attending school in person or participating in distance learning during the pandemic. It is highly recommended that children with special health care conditions consult their primary care physician to assist in determining the appropriateness of returning to in-person learning when the condition prevents safe usage of masks and/or cloth face coverings. Students who have a special healthcare condition that prevents his/her use of a mask will be required to provide medical documentation. Face Mask Medical Exemptions examples are listed here.

General Mask Guidance:

All children 3rd grade and up will be required to wear masks at school unless exempt as a result of a medical condition, mental health condition or disability that prevents wearing a face covering. Children under 3rd grade will be strongly encouraged to wear a mask. This includes people with a medical condition for whom wearing a face covering could obstruct breathing or who are unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove a face covering without assistance. If a student desires a mask to attend school and is unable to remove the mask on his or her own, s/he should be supervised by a caregiver who is able to immediately assist if needed. A face shield, preferably with a drape, is an acceptable alternative for students who meet exemption criteria.

The physical, developmental and behavioral conditions that may make wearing a mask unsafe for children are very rare. They include the following:

- Developmental delays
 - Children with limited motor control preventing them from removing his/her mask.
 - Children with difficulty managing oral secretions which may saturate the mask.
 - Children with mental health conditions that may prevent tolerance to a mask.
- Limited physical mobility
- Severe autism
- Structural abnormalities of the head or neck, however, some of these children may be able to wear bandana-style coverings.

Guidance for specific conditions:

- **Allergies.** There is no medical reason that allergies should prevent children from wearing masks. If a child is suffering from allergy-associated nasal congestion, over the counter or prescription steroid nasal sprays may provide relief.
- **Anxiety.** This is a difficult time for children who suffer from anxiety. Parents can support them by modeling appropriate mask wearing and providing factual, reality-based information about COVID19. For children with mask-related anxiety or distress who are going to school, please refer to the additional resources and information provided at the end of this document. Anxiety is not a medical reason for not wearing a mask and your child's pediatrician can help support your child.
- **Asthma.** Children with asthma should not be exempt from wearing masks, nor should masks cause asthma symptoms. It is always important for children to follow their prescribed asthma action plan, including their maintenance medications. Masks should be removed if a child experiences active asthma symptoms. If the asthma symptoms prevent wearing a mask, then the family should see their physician to work together to improve their asthma care.
- **Communication Differences:** Students who are deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing or speech impaired may require the use of face shields to promote adequate communication to access their education.
- **Cardiology.** There are no cardiology conditions that make wearing a mask unsafe for children who are well enough to attend school.
- **Developmental Pediatrics.** Some children with limited physical and/or mental capacity may not be able to wear masks safely. Masks may agitate some children with autism, behavioral challenges or intellectual disability. However, with consistent positive reinforcement and gradual desensitization, most children can get used to wearing a mask. Support should be provided at school to continue to encourage students in this category to wear masks, without excluding them from school if they cannot.
- **ENT.** Children who have structural abnormalities of the head, neck or face may not be able to wear a traditional mask safely but may be able to use a bandanna-style mask. These may also be helpful for children with tracheostomies.
- **Hematology/oncology.** If cancer and blood disorder patients are well enough to attend school in person, they should wear masks.
- **Neurology.** There are no neurological conditions that make wearing a mask unsafe for children who are well enough to attend school.
- **Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation.** Some children with limited physical mobility may not be able to wear masks safely and/or require an individual to monitor their facial covering at all times.
- **Pulmonology.** There are no pulmonology conditions that make wearing a mask unsafe for children who are well enough to attend school.

Resources to help children adapt to the use of masks:

[Kids Health – COVID-19 Articles for Parents](#)

[Helping Kids Get Used to Masks](#)

[National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)