



TOLERATING FACE COVERINGS

Face coverings

Wearing a face covering and seeing other people wearing them may be a new experience for a lot of people. For people with Learning Disabilities this might pose particular challenges: it may be harder for them to understand the reasons for the face covering and/or they may have communication difficulties and rely on seeing people's faces to help with understanding. Some people may find it difficult to recognise their friends, family and carers when they are wearing a face covering which could be confusing or distressing. Some may also experience Sensory Integration difficulties which make it really hard to tolerate the sensation of a face covering.

We want to help support people to get back to their normal routines and doing the things they enjoy as soon as possible. The following suggestions may help those who are struggling to tolerate wearing a face covering. Wearing a face covering can feel irritating and for someone who struggles with tactile sensation it can be particularly challenging. They may find the feel of the material and the sensation of their breath difficult to deal with. In addition, if they wear glasses these might fog up and impair their vision.

These are some top tips for using face coverings -

Choose a face cover that suits the individual's needs - it does not have to be a face mask and there are lots of other options: a light scarf, a 'buff', bandana or religious face covering are all acceptable options. Here are two examples:



Bandana:
Soft, cotton fabric
Seams not touching face
Doesn't hurt ears
May be harder to tie/untie independently



Light scarf:
Soft fabric
May fall down and encourage touching/adjustment
Could feel hot in warm weather
Lots of fabric could catch on wheelchair headrests, seat belts, etc.

Desensitisation – allow the person to see and feel the face covering, maybe support them to wear it for short periods of time initially to get used to the sensation of wearing it. For some people allowing them to wear the face covering at home to get used to it and see others do the same might help reduce their anxiety around wearing it out and about. Doing something they enjoy while wearing the mask/covering might help build positive associations. However, for others this might confuse them about the 'rules' of wearing masks. Social stories and easy read information can really help with understanding and accepting face coverings.

Choice - Supporting an individual to choose a face covering that they like or, if they are not able to participate in this, choosing one for them in their favourite colour/sports team/tv character can help with acceptance. There are lots of options available.

Fabric – soft jersey material (like a t-shirt) may feel softer than cotton, bamboo fabric is very soft and breathable, ‘technical’ fabric, like football shirts or sports tops are made from, is often more tolerable for people who are tactile defensive/hypersensitive because it’s very smooth and doesn’t bobble easily. Disposable masks vary in texture so it’s worth keeping in mind that some may feel different to others. If there are any seams on fabric masks these should be on the outside to avoid irritation. It is recommended that reusable face coverings are laundered at 60C. There are lots of DIY patterns available online if you want to make your own out of an old clothing garment or particular fabric.

Ties – if opting for a mask consider how it is secured. Fabric ties are generally more comfortable than elastic. Some ties hook over the ears and some go round the whole head. It’s worth thinking about what an individual might find easier. Ties that go round the head may be more adjustable but really good bilateral coordination is required to tie something behind your head independently. Thicker fabric ear loops are less likely to dig in than thin elastic ones. Using ‘ear savers’ or sewing buttons onto a hat or hair band and securing the mask to these instead of over the ears may help increase comfort. Here are some examples of styles of mask:



Easy to put on/take off
Soft material ear loops
Smooth, stretchy fabric
Stitching is on the outside
Reusable



Adjustable fit
Can be difficult to tie independently
Nose wire improves fit
Doesn’t hurt ears
Rougher than fabric mask
Disposable

Fit – you don’t want a face mask moving around too much as that will be more irritating and encourage touching the mask. The shaped masks can provide a better fit than the flat ones and may be in contact with the face less. Having a wire in the nose area helps to keep the mask away from the eyes. If you wear glasses they will probably steam up. There are various tips online to help with this - it’s worth experimenting!

Tolerance – the ‘light touch’ and or changing pressure of a face covering might be particularly aversive for some. For many people with sensory processing difficulties having some stimulus that activates their proprioceptive system can help to counteract this and have a calming/organising effect. Activities that give proprioceptive feedback are things that involve heavy muscle work such as pushing a shopping trolley or carrying shopping bags. Some people find that wearing a backpack with some weight to it, a weighted vest or lap weight might help. There are various options around weighted products - caps, hoodies, blankets, soft toys. For further advice on using weighted products please contact an Occupational Therapist. Weighted products should only be used for short periods and the person should be able to remove them.