



Topic Brief: Mask Wearing for Medical Appointments

Date: 01/18/2022

Nomination Number: 0968

Purpose: This document summarizes the information addressing a nomination submitted on December 13, 2021 through the Effective Health Care Website. This information was used to inform the Evidence-based Practice Center (EPC) Program decisions about whether to produce an evidence report and if so, what type of evidence report would be most suitable.

Issue: The nominator states that they cannot wear a mask during the COVID-19 pandemic due to anxiety from covering their nose and mouth but need to do so to receive medical care for a procedure. The nominator is asking whether this policy can be individualized based on the type of healthcare encounter and for specific medical conditions.

Program Decision and Summary: The EPC Program synthesizes and appraises existing evidence and does not develop policies. As such, this nomination falls outside of the purview of this program. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have updated their evidence-based mask recommendations throughout the pandemic based on emerging study findings and best practices. Accommodations for disabilities that may present barriers to mask wearing must be individualized in accordance with the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). We have included additional information and related resources that might be useful to the nominator.

Assessment Methods

We assessed nomination for priority for a systematic review or other AHRQ EPC report using a hierarchical process based on established selection criteria. Assessment of each criteria determined the need to evaluate the next one.

1. Determine the *appropriateness* of the nominated topic for inclusion in the EHC program.
2. Establish the overall *importance* of a potential topic as representing a health or healthcare issue in the United States.
3. Determine the *desirability of new evidence review* by examining whether a new systematic review or other AHRQ product would be duplicative.
4. Assess the *potential impact* of a new systematic review or other AHRQ product.
5. Assess whether the *current state of the evidence* allows for a systematic review or other AHRQ product (feasibility).
6. Determine the *potential value* of a new systematic review or other AHRQ product.

Background:

The CDC guidance on masks has evolved throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as more information has become available about the protective aspects of masks in various locations and for different variants of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. The goals of wearing a mask are to reduce exposure of the wearer to aerosolized viral particles in secretions of others

and to protect other individuals from exposure to SARS-CoV-2, especially those who cannot receive the vaccine or are at greater risk (due to associated comorbidities, immunocompromised status, etc.) of contracting SARS-CoV-2 or developing breakthrough infections from new or more infectious variants like Omicron.

States and healthcare facilities develop their own policies about masking based on CDC's national guidance, local rates of vaccination, and local rates of COVID-19 infection and hospitalization. Current CDC guidance, updated in February 2022, recommends universal masking and physical distancing when feasible for everyone in a healthcare setting, and provides additional guidance for special settings such as emergency medical services and dental facilities.¹

Unlike the general population, individuals with certain ADA, qualifying disabilities, such as chronic respiratory conditions or anxiety conditions, may experience special challenges with mask wearing and require accommodation. The CDC provides masking guidance for young children and people who have disabilities.² It states that people who “cannot wear or safely wear a mask because of a disability defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), should consider reasonable accommodation for workers (or people) who are not fully vaccinated, who are unable to wear a mask, or who have difficulty wearing certain types of masks because of disability.” Since the ADA requires that accommodations be individualized to address each person's unique disability and related barriers, people with disabilities impacting mask wearing can partner with their physician to identify reasonable modifications related to the masking requirement.

Related Resources

We identified the following resource, which may be of use to the nominator:

- Masks for COVID-19 Management and ADA Accommodations: Addressing Mask Wearing during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Job Accommodation Network (JAN). Accessed on February 17, 2022 at https://askjan.org/articles/Masks-for-COVID-19-Management-and-ADA-Accommodations.cfm?csSearch=3841649_1

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Interim Infection Prevention and Control Recommendations for Healthcare Personnel During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic. CDC.gov; 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/infection-control-recommendations.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fhcp%2Finfection-control-after-vaccination.html. Accessed on 2/23/2022 2022.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Your Guide to Masks. CDC.gov; 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/about-face-coverings.html>. Accessed on February 18 2022.

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