Medical Exemption Letter FAQs

FAQs: Mask Use Exemption Letters

What is the new public order for mask exemptions?
On May 13, 2021, the Government of Alberta passed an order requiring any Albertan seeking an exemption to public mask use to have a letter from either a physician, nurse practitioner or psychologist. The only criteria for which physicians can issue a medical exemption letter includes:

- Sensory processing disorders
- Developmental delay
- Cognitive impairment
- Mental illnesses including:
  - anxiety disorders
  - psychotic disorders
  - dissociative identity disorder
  - depressive disorders
- Facial trauma or recent oral maxillofacial surgery
- Contact dermatitis or allergic reactions to mask components
- Clinically significant acute respiratory distress

Can physicians bill for this service?
The information provided by Alberta Health states physicians can bill for the patient assessment, however providing the letter itself is a third-party, uninsured service. Physicians are required to follow the standard of practice on Charging for Uninsured Professional Services and should direct any questions about billing to Alberta Health or the AMA.

Are physicians obligated to provide exemption letters?
- Physicians should only provide mask exemptions when their patient meets the criteria noted above and the physician provides treatment for the condition noted above.
  - Physicians should balance the risk to the patient and others from not wearing a mask, with the severity of the condition making the patient exempt.
- Physicians are not obligated to provide an exemption letter if their clinical judgment determines the patient does not qualify. Such decisions should be documented in the patient’s chart.

Physicians are extremely busy at this time, how should they manage this increase in volume?
- Physicians will need to triage the severity of their patient’s conditions and health needs. In instances where a physician does not have the capacity to see all patients,
priority should be given to those who are most ill. This may result in the delay of medical exemption letters to prioritize more urgent care.

What if a physician does not want to provide these letters?
CPSA asks all physicians to do their part to assess their patients who believe they may qualify for an exemption. Please do not create a blanket rule refusing the assessment and issuing of medical exemption letters. Additionally, physicians should not over-issue the letters if their need is not clinically indicated.

If after an assessment, clinical judgment does not indicate a medical exemption letter is required, the physician is not required to provide one. That said, physicians should be cautious about refusing the medical exemption letter if the patient does have one of the conditions listed.

Should physicians default to providing letters to all patients who ask?
No, it is important to assess each patient seeking an exemption individually, based on the following criteria as per the Chief Medical Officer of Health Order:

- Sensory processing disorders
- Developmental delay
- Cognitive impairment
- Mental illnesses including:
  - anxiety disorders
  - psychotic disorders
  - dissociative identity disorder
  - depressive disorders
- Facial trauma or recent oral maxillofacial surgery
- Contact dermatitis or allergic reactions to mask components
- Clinically significant acute respiratory distress

Over-issuing medical exemption letters or using poor clinical judgment to justify the exemption could be considered unprofessional conduct. These letters may be used in court proceedings by patients who receive a fine for not wearing a mask. It is important that physicians have good evidence to support their rationale to provide an exemption.

If a physician is asked to provide a letter for a patient with a condition they are not treating, should they provide one?
The physician who provides care for the condition qualifying a patient for an exemption should ideally provide the medical exemption letter. For example, an emergency room physician should not provide a letter for a patient with a qualifying mental health condition. In this instance, the letter should be provided by their primary care physician.

How long is the exemption valid?
The medical exemption letter is valid for one year from the date it is issued.
What information must be included in the exemption letter?
Physicians should use the template provided on the Physician Portal, which includes:
   a) the name of the person to whom the exemption applies;
   b) the name, phone number, email address, professional registration number and signature of the authorizing health professional; and
   c) the date on which the written confirmation was provided.
   d) although the medical exemption letter must verify that a health condition applies, it must not include specific information about the health condition.

Are any groups of Albertans exempt from the exemption letter requirement?
Yes, the following exemptions apply to students and children:
   • A child under two years of age does not need to wear a face mask at all times while attending an indoor public place.
   • A child does not need to wear a face mask while attending any of the following child care programs:
      o a facility-based program providing daycare, out-of-school care or preschool care;
      o a family dayhome program;
      o a group family child care program;
      o an innovative child care program.
   • A student, including a student who attends a home schooling co-op, does not need to wear a face mask while attending:
      o an early childhood services program;
      o grades one through three at an indoor location within a school building; or
      o the home schooling equivalent to an early childhood services program, grades one, two and three at a home schooling co-op.

What should patients expect when they visit their physician seeking a mask exemption?
The physician will assess the patient to determine if they qualify for an exemption based on the medical criteria provided by the Chief Medical Office of Health.

It is possible the physician will use their clinical judgment to determine the patient is not eligible for an exemption. Even if the patient receives a response they do not want, they’re asked to treat their physician with respect. If a physician provides a letter that’s not consistent with the public health order, they could be found guilty of unprofessional conduct. For this reason, the patient should not put undue pressure on the physician, while understanding the physician’s obligations to uphold the public health order.

If a patient is issued a medical exemption letter, they do not need to have the letter with them at all times. However, if one is issued a ticket for not wearing a mask, the letter will need to be provided to the courts to prove the patient qualifies for a mask exemption.
I am a physician and due to my personal health conditions, I have obtained a mask exemption letter. Do I need to mask at work?
All physicians, staff and volunteers in community medical clinics providing direct patient care or working in care areas should wear a surgical/procedure mask at all times. Continuous masking protects healthcare workers while reducing the risk of transmitting COVID-19 to patients.

CPSA expects that direct patient care only be provided by physicians or clinic staff who are wearing a surgical/procedure mask. However, in cases where a physician or clinic staff member cannot wear a mask and they have a medical exemption letter, they must interact with patients in a way that offers at least as much protection as masking (under Chief Medical Officer of Health Order 25). Examples include:

- Switching to virtual appointments and assessments
- Postponing procedures that involve interaction at a distance of less than two metres
- Assigning space for clinic staff with mask exceptions to work alone in workspaces
- Referring patients to other regulated health professionals when direct patient care is required
- Maintaining a distance of two metres at all times from patients and other staff while wearing a face shield* that extends around the sides of the face and below the chin

*Face shields offer eye protection to the person wearing them, but offer insufficient protection to the wearer and others from respiratory droplets. Face shields are not considered a suitable alternative to surgical/procedure masks when providing direct patient care at a distance of less than two metres.