

FAQs: Mask Use Exemption Letters

What are the current provincial requirements for masking?

There are presently no province-wide requirements for indoor masking set out by Alberta Health or the Government of Alberta. However, many workplaces, including health care facilities and medical clinics, request that visitors and staff wear masks to reduce the likelihood of transmission to those who are vulnerable. Masking may also be required for some forms of travel. As a result, patients may continue to seek these kinds of exemptions from physicians.

Are physicians obligated to provide exemption notes?

Physicians should limit mask exemptions to circumstances where their patient has a warranting health condition that the physician provides treatment for. Physicians should balance the risk to the patient and others from not wearing a mask with the clinical significance of the patient's condition.

A patient having one of the warranting health conditions does not automatically obligate the physician to provide a mask exemption. The physician's clinical judgement may remain that an exemption is inappropriate or unnecessary. Such decisions should be documented in the patient's chart.

What criteria should a physician consider if a patient requests a mask exemption?

A patient's moral objection to masking is not considered a sufficient clinical reason to be given an exemption. Similarly, providing mask exemptions for requests related to travel or employment is inappropriate.

Generally speaking, the warranting health conditions for masking exemptions are:

- Sensory processing disorders.
- Developmental delay.
- Cognitive impairment.
- Clinically significant 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 a mask exemption be issued for health conditions that are not listed?

These circumstances are expected to be rare, however CPSA understands that there may be circumstances where a physician issues a mask exemption to a patient who does not have one of the warranting health conditions. CPSA supports clinical decision-making provided that the physician's clinical judgement and reasoning are adequately documented.

Can physicians bill for this service?

The information provided by Alberta Health states physicians can bill for the patient assessment, however providing the note 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.

Can a physician have a blanket policy not to provide exemption?

If a physician refuses to assess patients who request a mask exemption, or refuses to issue exemptions to all patients, their conduct may be considered unprofessional.

If, after assessing the patient, the physician's clinical judgment is that a mask exemption is not warranted, the physician is not required to provide one. Physicians should document their clinical decision making where an exemption is denied for a patient, particularly for those who have one of the warranting health conditions.

Should physicians default to providing notes to all patients who ask?

No, it is important to assess each patient individually using the suggested criteria listed above. Over-issuing mask exemptions or using poor clinical judgement to justify the exemption may be considered unprofessional conduct. Further, this can have a negative impact on other medical healthcare facilities in the community that use masking to reduce the spread of infection.

If a physician is asked to provide a note for a patient who has a condition the physician is not treating, should they provide a note?

Ideally, the physician who provides care for the patient's warranting condition should provide the medical exemption letter. For example, an emergency room physician should not provide a note for a patient with a qualifying mental health condition. In this instance, the note should be provided by the patient's primary care physician.

How long is a mask exemption valid?

The need for a renewed exemption should be re-assessed periodically. It is recommended that a mask exemption be valid for up to one year from the date it is issued. Issuing "blanket" or "lifetime" exemptions may be considered unprofessional.

What information should be included in the exemption?

A template letter for mask exemptions is available on the physician portal. Physicians are expected to indicate the following information:

- 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;
- c) the date on which the written confirmation was provided; and
- d) the date the exemption expires.

Although the medical exemption letter should verify that a warranting health condition applies, it must not include specific information about the patient's health condition.

What should patients expect when they visit their physician seeking a mask exemption?

Physicians may express the importance of using the appropriate criteria to determine if an exemption is warranted. Physicians may also communicate that if they provide an exemption letter that's not consistent with this criteria, it may be considered unprofessional conduct. Patients should not put undue pressure on physicians and are expected to be understanding of the physician's professional obligations.

What if a patient becomes upset after a request is denied?

CPSA understands that physicians will need to decline mask exemption requests, and this may result in some patients acting out verbally and/or physically. If a patient becomes abusive toward a physician, staff member or other patients, the patient may be asked to leave the premises. Physicians are not expected to tolerate this type of behaviour and have the right to immediately discharge patients who act in this manner from their practice under the [Terminating the Physician-Patient Relationship](#) standard of practice. Clinic staff should also contact local law enforcement immediately if the safety of staff and patients is in question.

What can physicians and clinic staff do to avoid confrontation?

To avoid potential conflict with upset patients, CPSA is supportive of clinic staff screening patients before their arrival to determine if the nature of the visit is related to an exemption request. In some instances, these types of assessments may be conducted virtually to avoid an in-person confrontation. For assessments that must be conducted in-person, physicians may want to employ a buddy system to avoid being alone in a room, or advise the patient that they will be contacted at a later date, by phone, with a decision.