

FAQs: Mask Use Exemption Letters

What is the public order for mask exemptions?

Province-wide requirements for indoor public masking were reinstated by Alberta Health on September 4, 2021. Any Albertan seeking an exemption to masking requirements in indoor public spaces and workplaces must have a note from either a physician, nurse practitioner or psychologist. Chief Medical Officer of Health [Order 40-2021](#) sets out that the **only** health conditions for which physicians may issue medical exemption letter are:

- 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 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.

Are physicians obligated to provide exemption notes?

- Physicians may 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.
- Having one of the conditions listed does not automatically qualify a patient for a mask exemption. Physicians are not obligated to provide an exemption note if their clinical judgement 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 when 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 mask exemption notes to prioritize more urgent care.

What if a physician does not want to provide these notes?

A physician who refuses to provide mask exemption notes to patients they treat for the conditions noted above may be at risk of unprofessional conduct.

If, after an assessment, clinical judgment does not indicate a mask exemption note 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 notes 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](#). The specific health conditions that would qualify for a mask exemption are:

- 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 mask exemption notes or using poor clinical judgement to justify the exemption could be considered unprofessional conduct. These notes 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 note for a patient with a condition they are not treating, should they provide a note?

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 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 the mask exemption valid?

The mask exemption letter is valid for up to one year from the date it is issued. Issuing "blanket" or "lifetime" exemptions would be considered unprofessional.

What information must be included in the exemption letter?

The suggested template for mask exemption notes can be found [here](#) or on the physician portal. Required information 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;
- c) the date on which the written confirmation was provided.
- d) The date of expiry of the exemption.

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

Are there any non-medical exceptions to the masking requirements?

Yes. Physicians should be mindful that in some cases a medical exemption note may not be necessary. [Alberta Health](#) has indicated that there are certain exceptions to the general requirement for masking in all indoor public places. Masks are not required in the following circumstances:

- In K-12 schools, unless mandated by the school board (Masking is required in post-secondary institutions).
- While participating in a physical fitness or performance activity.
- While participating in a worship service in a place of worship.
- If individual is unable to place, use or remove a face mask without assistance.
- While seated and consuming food or drink.
- While providing or receiving care or assistance where a face mask would hinder that caregiving or assistance.
- Where an individual is alone at a workstation and separated by at least two metres distance from all other persons.
- Where a workplace hazard assessment has determined that the worker's safety will be at risk if the person wears a mask while working.
- Where an individual is separated from every other person by a physical barrier that prevents droplet transmission.
- If a person needs to temporarily remove their face mask while in the public place for the purposes of receiving a service that requires the temporary removal of their face mask, emergency or medical treatment or establishing their identity.

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 specific medical criteria provided by the Chief Medical Office of Health. Patients should be made aware that the physician will use their clinical judgement to determine if the patient is eligible for an exemption. Physicians may also communicate that if they provide an exemption 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.

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

CPSA understands that physicians will need to decline mask exemption requests and have heard reports of patients acting out with verbal and physical aggression. 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.