



June 8, 2020

Dr. Robert Redfield, M.D.
Director
Centers for Disease Control & Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Director Redfield:

Currently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends the use of face masks and solid cloth coverings by health care providers and the general public to limit the spread of viral pathogens. While necessary to contain COVID-19, face mask usage can pose significant everyday challenges for people with communication disorders—potentially impacting their health, safety, and quality of life. At least 46 million people in the United States have a hearing or other communication disorder, making this a pressing public health issue.

On behalf of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, I write today to bring these challenges to your attention—and to urge the CDC to revise its current recommendations to emphasize the need for clear face masks and the use of other communication aids as resources that should be widely available, specifically in health care settings.

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) is the national professional, scientific, and credentialing association for 211,000 members and affiliates who are audiologists; speech-language pathologists; speech, language, and hearing scientists; audiology and speech-language pathology support personnel; and students. Audiologists specialize in preventing and assessing hearing and balance disorders as well as providing audiologic treatment, including hearing aids. Speech-language pathologists identify, assess, and treat speech and language problems, including swallowing disorders.

Impact of Face Masks on Communication

Solid face masks and coverings reduce the effectiveness of spoken communication, especially for people with hearing and speech disorders.

Face masks dampen and filter sound, degrading speech intelligibility, and remove the visual cues that facilitate comprehension of speech. The impact of face masks places those with hearing loss and other communication disorders at a higher risk for adverse medical events and contributes to social isolation. While face masks pose challenges for people with communication disorders most acutely, they can make communication more difficult for anyone. Broader availability and use of clear face masks can help mitigate these outcomes.

Flexible Communication Methods

ASHA urges the CDC to recognize and promote the importance of making *flexible communication methods* available for patients seeking health care assessment and treatment. A clear face mask may be useful for some individuals. However, in many cases, the addition of visual cues will not offset the challenges created by the reduced volume and distortion of the speech signal face masks/covering creates.

If the use of a solid mask or a clear mask impedes an individual's ability to engage in effective communication, there needs to be a flexible approach to achieving effective communication. For example, shared computer screens, note pads, whiteboards, voice to speech applications, personal sound amplifiers, use of plexiglass barriers for visualization of a patient's and/or the provider's face, and other related resources can assist in making communication more effective. As with all equipment, thorough training and instruction are often needed. The use of clear masks should be part of a range of aids and devices available to ensure effective communication of medical needs and preferences.

ASHA further urges the CDC to revise its "Recommendation Regarding the Use of Cloth Face Coverings, Especially in Areas of Significant Community-Based Transmission", to highlight how the use of clear face masks, and other communication tools, may help facilitate communication when appropriate and also emphasize the importance of alternative means of both communication and receiving treatment as critical elements clinicians must consider during the pandemic. Telehealth technology should be used, whenever clinically appropriate, to reduce unnecessary risk of transmission.

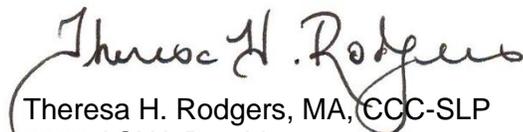
ASHA asks the CDC to promote the use of clear face masks to help ensure they are available to the public particularly when communicating with individuals who have communication disorders. The use of other aids to maximize the quality of communication should be readily promoted and available to meet the needs of Americans with communication disorders as well. Additional detail regarding recommendations for effective communication and their importance to consumers with communication disorders is available from the Hearing Loss Association of America in the following resources:

- [Recommendations for Hospitals and Facilities](#)
- [Recommendations for Patients Communicating with Health Care Professionals](#)

ASHA appreciates the CDC's leadership in guiding the country through the COVID-19 pandemic, and welcomes the opportunity to collaborate with the CDC moving forward.

If you or your staff have any questions, please contact Jerry White, ASHA's Director of Federal Affairs, Health Care, at jwhite@asha.org, or Laurie Alban Havens, ASHA's Director of Health Care Policy, Medicaid & Private Health Plans, at lalbanhavens@asha.org.

Sincerely,



Theresa H. Rodgers, MA, CCC-SLP
2020 ASHA President