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| Face masks at work: Frequently asked questions for disability support workers Last updated: 22 July 2020 |

The Chief Health Officer for Victoria recommends that adults wear a face covering when outside their home if it is difficult to keep 1.5 metres apart from other people.

From 11.59pm 22 July, if you live within metropolitan Melbourne or Mitchell Shire, you must wear a face covering whenever you leave your home, unless an exception applies. A face covering needs to cover both your nose and mouth. It could be a face mask or shield.

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| The Department of Health and Human Services website provides general guidance about the use of face coverings, the types of face coverings available and their recommended use. This information can be found at: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/updates/coronavirus-covid-19/face-coverings-1159pm-wednesday-22-july> Wearing masks - disability support workersWhy do I need to wear a mask?Wearing a mask helps keep you and others safe. Coronavirus (COVID-19) is spread from close contact with a person with the virus. Masks are helpful to stop droplets from spreading when someone speaks, laughs, coughs or sneezes, including someone who has coronavirus (COVID-19) and is contagious but feels well. The best way to protect other people from coronavirus (COVID-19) is staying home when you feel unwell, keeping 1.5 metres apart, wash your hands often, and cough or sneeze into your elbow or tissue. Masks add an additional protective physical barrier to protect you and the people you care for.For disability support workers working in sensitive settings such as disability residential services, or when supporting people with disability in their own home, it is important that masks are worn to protect vulnerable clients and keep clients and workers safe.What type of mask should I wear?Disability support workers should wear single use surgical masks. Single use surgical masks work well and can be disposed of quickly and easily. In very limited circumstances, there may be other options such as using a face shield. Do not use a reusable cloth mask, scarf or bandana.Your employer is responsible for providing you with surgical masks.More information on wearing face masks is available at <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/face-masks-covid-19> When should I wear a mask?All disability support workers are required to wear a single use surgical mask when at work at all times. This applies across the whole of Victoria. In limited situations, other options may be available such as use of a face shield, however use of a surgical mask provides the best protection and is the preferred option. Are there reasons for not wearing a mask at work? For the safety of clients and other staff it is necessary that you wear a mask. If you cannot wear a mask for a medical reason such as a breathing problem or skin infection, you will need to discuss this with your manager. If your client gets or is likely to get distressed, alarmed, violent or has communication difficulties such as reliance on lip reading, because you are wearing a mask you will need to consider alternative options. Discuss this with your client and your manager. For example, you may be able to talk to your client first about the support needed from a safe distance, and then put on the face mask when you assist them. In very limited circumstances, the option of a face shield may be considered. Can I take off my mask if I find it uncomfortable whilst working?It is important that you wear your face mask all the time when at work, but some people may require short breaks from wearing their mask. When you do so, ensure you are well away from other people, and follow this advice when removing your mask. (<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/face-masks-covid-19#whats-the-best-way-to-take-off-a-face-mask> ) A short break of up to two minutes is allowed.You should not take off your mask in staff only areas if other staff are using that space. Communicate with other staff to make sure you take a break at different times so you can eat meals safely. Make sure the staff only areas are kept clean and hygienic ready for the next staff member.How often do I need to change my mask?A surgical mask may be worn for up to four hours, however it must be changed sooner if it becomes damp, dirty or damaged. The same mask may be worn to attend to a number of clients for up to four hours, including if you are visiting more than one client in their own home and during the period of travelling to each residence. However the mask should be used continuously and discarded if it is removed between clients (single use surgical masks should not be reused).How do I use a mask safely?For people who are using a mask it is important to wear it properly:* wash or sanitise your hands for 20 seconds before putting it on **and** after taking it off
* make sure the mask covers your nose and mouth and fits snugly under your chin, over the bridge of your nose and against the sides of your face
* do not touch the front of your mask while wearing or removing it
* do not allow the mask to hang around your neck or under your nose
* do not pull your mask up and down to talk or drink or eat
* a mask may be worn for up to four hours, or change sooner if it becomes damp, dirty or damaged
* do not reuse single use masks
* wash and dry reusable masks after use and store in a clean dry place.

It is really important to know how to put on a face mask properly and take it off safely. Otherwise the advantages of wearing a face mask will be lost and you or others may be at risk from a contaminated face mask. See here for more details: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/face-masks-covid-19#whats-the-best-way-to-take-off-a-face-mask> If face shields are considered, reusable face shields should be cleaned and disinfected after each use. Disposable face shields should only be worn for single use. Will wearing a mask make me safe from coronavirus (COVID-19)?Wearing a face mask can help reduce the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) but you can still catch and spread coronavirus while wearing a mask. You still need to practice all the other precautions such as:* stay at home if unwell and get tested
* maintain physical distance (more than1.5 meters) from other people
* practise good hand and respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette
* disinfect high touch surfaces.

Always tell your employer if you are feeling unwell and if you have respiratory symptoms it is important to get tested.If I’m wearing a mask do I still need to physically distance from people?Yes, physical distancing is important to reduce the chance of passing on or getting coronavirus (COVID-19) even if you are wearing a mask. A mask provides extra protection but is not a guarantee against the spread of infection. Regular hand washing also remains as a vital measure, particularly when putting on and taking off a mask.Wearing face coverings - People with disabilityDoes a person need to wear a face covering when I am providing support to them? People with disability do not need to wear a face covering when they are at home. It is preferable that people do wear a mask when their support worker is assisting them, but they may choose not to do this if they feel more comfortable. The best face covering for people with disability is either a reusable cloth mask or a single use surgical mask.Do residents of disability residential services need to wear face coverings at all times?The requirement to wear face coverings applies when people are outside of their home for one of the four reasons. It does not apply to residents while they are in the residential service. However, it does apply to the facility’s staff and visitors inside the facility and when a resident leaves the facility for one of the four reasons.What do I do if a person is uncomfortable or frightened about me wearing a mask?Masks can be confronting and a barrier to communication and support. If seeing you in a mask reduces a person’s sense of confidence or safety you should talk to them about this. If they find it hard to understand or hear you when wearing a mask, you might need to work together on how you can provide support and still both be protected from possible spread of coronavirus (COVID-19). For example, you may need to talk to the person first about the support they need from a safe distance, and then put on the mask while you assist them.In very limited circumstances, the use of other options such as face shields may be considered. VisitorsDo visitors to disability residential services need to wear a face mask?It is important that visitors wear face masks to reduce the risk of introducing coronavirus (COVID-19) into the house. Visitors should not enter the house if they are feeling unwell or have been confirmed or are suspected of having coronavirus (COVID-19).Visitors are being restricted in disability residential services to help prevent the spread of coronavirus. Visitors need to wear a face mask to reduce the risk of introducing coronavirus (COVID-19) into the disability residential service.Children Do children need to wear face coverings?Children under the age of twelve do not need to wear face coverings when they leave their home.In restricted areas, children over the age of twelve must wear a face covering when they leave their home, including when they are at school and when travelling to and from school.As with adults with disability, there are exemptions for children with disability if it is impractical or unsafe to wear a face covering. For example, if wearing a face covering poses a medical risk or will significantly limit communication or cause undue anxiety. Children with disability attending specialist schools are exempted from needing to wear a face covering. |
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