

# How to Help Those with Sensory Needs Successfully Wear a Face Mask

Wearing a face mask helps slow the spread of COVID-19 and keeps you and those around you safe and healthy. But masks can be challenging for those with sensory sensitivities. Here are some sensory strategies to help make wearing a face mask more comfortable.

## CONSIDER THE FABRIC

There are many fabric options for face masks. Some individuals might prefer disposable masks, while others might like cloth, reusable masks. Cloth masks include simple cotton ones and those with a stretchy material that are often labeled as a "sport" or "active" mask. Find the material that works best for your loved one, but make sure the mask you choose meets [Minnesota Department of Health guidelines](#).



Your loved one might also be more motivated to wear a mask in a favorite color or featuring a favorite character. Let them help pick out the mask, so they are engaged throughout the process.

## THINK ABOUT HOW IT FASTENS

The way a mask fastens can be bothersome. Earloops might tug at ears. For others, a head strap puts pressure on the scalp, causing sensitivity. If earloops are preferred, look for masks with adjustable earloops to customize the fit. There are headbands or hats with fasteners for a mask to hook onto to evenly disperse the pressure. If your loved one isn't ready to put the mask all the way on at first, have them hold it up to their nose and mouth without securing it and advance from there as they get more comfortable.

If your loved one wears glasses, you can add a nose bridge, so the mask fits tighter. If that's not comfortable, encourage them to pull their mask up so their glasses sit on top to create a seal.

## PRACTICE AT HOME

Have your loved one practice wearing a mask for short periods at home; for example, wear a mask for a minute or two while watching a favorite video or playing a card game. Keep these interactions short and fun. Intersperse these throughout the day, so it becomes a regular part of their routine. Also, because masks can be warm or feel wet on our skin as we breathe into them, prepare your loved one for this sensation by holding up a warm washcloth to different parts of their face.

### MODEL IT WITH THEM

It helps if your loved one sees you, and other members of your household, wear a mask with them. You can model how to put on and take off a mask, and have them copy your actions. This gives your loved one autonomy, and provides a visual demonstration. They could also practice putting a face mask on their favorite doll or stuffed animal.

### ENGAGE WITH SENSORY TOOLS

Using sensory tools can help support sensory needs while wearing a mask. The individual could use a fidget to give their hands tactile input and redirect them away from touching their mask. They could wear a compression shirt to give calming deep pressure input

while in public. They could also wear noise-reducing headphones to decrease auditory stimuli that might feel overwhelming. If your loved one is in occupational therapy, ask their therapist what sensory tools might be helpful.

### USE VISUAL TOOLS

Using visual tools can help decrease anxiety around new experiences by increasing understanding and engagement. You could try a [visual schedule](#) that breaks down the steps of the experience, with putting on a mask as the first step and taking it off is as the last step. You could also use a [social narrative](#) that explains why following health and safety guidelines helps keep everyone safe during the pandemic. Try using a timer to show your loved one exactly how long they need to wear a mask. Give yourself enough time to complete your task, because when the timer hits zero, your loved one will think they can take off their mask, no matter what's going on.

### CREATE A MASK HABIT

Masks felt uncomfortable for many, at first. But the more we wore masks, the more we got used to it, and the more the discomfort gradually faded away. The process may take longer for those with sensory needs, so keep practicing and using the mask regularly. This helps your loved one get used to the sensation and makes it less challenging.

