

Communication Tips During the COVID-19 Pandemic:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals are required to wear masks. Opaque masks prevent individuals with hearing loss from reading speech cues in listening environments.

Dr. Thibodeau and the hearing health lab have been investigating the impact of transparent window masks. We conducted a study and found a significant benefit of transparent masks when measuring speech recognition for listeners with normal hearing and hearing loss (Thibodeau et al. 2020).

Below are communication tips for individuals with hearing loss to improve communication in difficult listening situations:

- **Wear a transparent face mask** since 2016, there has been an FDA-approved transparent surgical face mask (The Communicator from Safe 'N' Clear). Or, consider using a washable fabric mask made with a transparent window. This type of mask can allow the individual to see speech cues and lip read.
- **Check any devices.** If you have hearing aids or cochlear implant, ensure it is functioning correctly to receive maximum benefit
- **Use clear speech.** Use a slow rate of speech and pronounce every word accurately. Don't shout or over exaggerate words.
- **Use gestures along with verbal expression.** Hand gestures and other nonverbal movements can aid your verbal message.
- **Ask the client how they prefer to communicate,** if mask presents a difficulty, ask individual for communication preferences. Use pen and paper to help if needed.
- **Wear gloves** if the client needs touch as part of their communication. Use other senses that are intact.
- **Reduce background noise sources.** Face masks can reduce overall intensity and reduce and/or distort certain speech frequencies, remove competing noise.
- **Use personal amplifiers and assistive listening devices** to improve signal-to-noise ratio. Inexpensive devices are available as well as amplifier applications on smartphones.
- **Consider using an automatic speech-to-text app** (such as Otter, Live Transcribe, or Ava) on a smartphone so the individual can read what you're saying. The speaker should speak directly into the provided microphone (no more than six inches away) for maximum accuracy.
- **Virtual visits** allow for live captioning. Contact your health care provider to see if virtual visits with captions are available. It is also possible to invite interpreters to healthcare visits for interpretation of American Sign Language for more accessible communication.

Baltimore, W. J., & Atcherson, S. R. (2020, June 01). Helping Our Clients Parse Speech Through Masks During COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://leader.pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/leader.MIW.25062020.34/full/>

Mckee, M., Moran, C., & Zazove, P. (2020). Overcoming Additional Barriers to Care for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Patients During COVID-19. *JAMA Otolaryngology–Head & Neck Surgery*, *146*(9), 781. doi:10.1001/jamaoto.2020.1705

Thibodeau, L., Thibodeau-Neilsen, R., Tran, C. M., & Tangerino De Souza Jacob, R. (Manuscript in preparation). Evaluation of Face Mask Styles on Communication.