

How to wear a face mask with your hearing aids

Joy Victory, managing editor, Healthy Hearin, August 19, 2020

Face masks are now required in many public places to help prevent the spread of coronavirus. For people with hearing loss, though, this may be easier said than done.

That's because face masks add extra challenges for people with hearing impairments:

- It's harder to understand people when they're speaking to you with a mask on their face.
- If you wear hearing aids, the ear loops may tug on your hearing aids and cause other problems.

"I have yet to figure out a way to remove my mask without the hearing aids also coming off," explained Martha Malan, of St. Paul, Minn. She normally wears hearing aids and eyeglasses. Now she also has to contend with elastic ear loops on the backs of her ears. "It's a challenge," she added.

Tips for wearing a mask with hearing aids

If you wear behind-the-ear [hearing aids](#), you will likely encounter some problems trying to wear a standard face mask with elastic ear loops. The loops may tug at the wire or tube that goes from the body of the hearing aid down to your ear. You also may inadvertently pull your hearing aids out and lose them when removing your mask. What's a hearing aid wearer to do?

Mask extenders and hearing aids

Mask extenders are a great way to get a snug fit without dislodging your hearing aids and/or eyeglasses. Options include:

- Using a fabric or bendable plastic mask extender with buttons or other notches to attach the mask straps
- Using simple tools like plastic s-hooks for straps
- Use a cord-and-clip system, such as Ear Gear or Earstay to secure hearing aids
- A ponytail or bun can also be used as a loop anchor

"There have been calls for the public to use transparent face shields, rather than masks, which may offer a solution. But the public has yet to adopt this solution," [said](#) Kevin Munro, PhD, professor of audiology at the University of Manchester in the U.K.

A similar sentiment is supported by the CDC, which states in their [guidelines on wearing cloth face coverings](#):

People who are deaf or hard of hearing—or those who care for or interact with a person who is hearing impaired—may be unable to wear cloth face coverings if they rely on lipreading to communicate. In this situation, consider using a clear face covering.

If a clear face covering isn't available, consider whether you can use written communication, use closed captioning, or decrease background noise to make communication possible while wearing a cloth face covering that blocks your lips.

How to speak to people with hearing loss when wearing a mask

In medical settings

People with hearing loss also face challenges when trying to listen to someone who is wearing a mask. In medical settings, where stress is running high and provider-to-patient communication is tantamount, muffled speech can lead to frustrating scenarios on both sides. It's also harder to read facial expressions.

"Masks pose two obvious problems for patients with hearing loss: the patient cannot gain any cues from lipreading, and the voice of the healthcare provider is attenuated and distorted," note the authors of the study "[How do medical masks degrade speech reception?](#)", published in The Hearing Review. (In this context, "attenuated" means a mask lowers the volume of a person's voice.)

Speech could be "close to unintelligible" for many hospitalized people with hearing loss, the study noted.

To help, the authors provided this checklist for talking to patients with hearing loss in medical settings:

- Reduce the room's noise and get the patient's attention
- Ask how the patient prefers to communicate
- Speak slowly and clearly
- Do not shout (this can be [painful to a person with hearing loss](#))
- Make sure hearing aid wearers are using them
- Consider using a portable hearing aid amplifier
- Rephrase remarks if not understood
- Take turns while speaking to the patient
- Do not talk while walking
- If obtainable, [masks with clear plastic](#) make lipreading easier

"Speakers often naturally try to compensate by projecting, but a more effective approach is to speak more clearly, with greater enunciation," [explains](#) Nicole Marrone, PhD, associate professor in Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences at the University of Arizona.

In public settings:

When out in public, such as at a shopping trip, these tips can't always be followed. But, for example, if you and your spouse are both wearing masks, make sure your spouse is aware they must speak more slowly and clearly to you. And speak up for yourself when talking to strangers, letting them know you can't hear well and need them to speak more clearly.

If you're the one trying to speak to someone with hearing loss, "use some creativity to get your meaning conveyed, instead of repeating the same misunderstood phrases over and over again," recommends Dr. Mandy Mroz, AuD, president of Healthy Hearing. "Don't underestimate the power of body language, eye contact and slowing down speech to be more clear."



Healthy Hearing
WWW.HEALTHYHEARING.COM

Hearing loss & face masks



If you wear hearing aids



Remove mask carefully

So you don't accidentally yank out your hearing aids.

Fabric ties may work better

Fabric ties can be loosened and may not interfere with hearing aids as much as elastic ear loops.

Use a mask holder

These are worn near the back of the head and can hold the ear loops, reducing interference with your hearing aids (and eyeglasses).

Communicating when wearing a mask



Speak slowly, clearly and at a normal volume.



Make sure hearing aid users have them on.



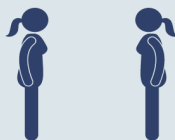
Rephrase remarks when not understood.



Keep background noise in the room to a minimum.



Take turns when speaking.



Face each other (at a safe distance).