

Tips for Communicating with Patients while Wearing a Mask

In these times where face masks and physical distancing are necessary to reduce the spread of infection, patients with hearing loss (and even some with normal hearing) are experiencing increased difficulties understanding spoken language. These difficulties arise because surgical masks distort and weaken auditory cues, and eliminate visual cues provided by the lips of the person speaking. Ineffective communication can cause frustration, stress or anxiety for everyone involved in the interaction.

The following tips may help improve communication when the patient or caregiver is experiencing communication difficulty:



Visual Cues

- Provider or staff may use a clear face mask for patients with hearing loss*
- Type out and laminate cue cards with common case history questions or instructions for common procedures/tests
- Use visual cues, such as a photo or illustration
- Use gestures as a form of visual cue

Speaking

- Pay attention to the patient's ability to understand spoken language
- Face the patient and speak clearly
- Speak a little louder, without shouting
- Reduce background noise when possible
- Confirm the patient understood what you said
- If the patient does not understand, rephrase or use an alternative form of communication

Writing

- Use an alternative form of communication such as a speech-to-text application (e.g., Notes app on smartphone), typed questions in Word for the patient to read, or written communication (pen/paper or dry-erase board)
- Ask family member or care giver to take notes

* Duke Health has procured a limited number of Clear Front face masks to help aid in communication for patients, visitors, providers and staff members who are deaf or hard of hearing. These masks are to be utilized as an accommodation for individuals with disabilities and are not to be used to enhance or supplement Duke-issued PPE for our patients and visitors without hearing loss. The clear front mask is to be worn by the healthcare provider to assist in effective communication. The individual with hearing loss does not need to wear the clear front mask. Descriptions of the mask can be found at <https://www.theclearmask.com/product>. Clinics may use SAP 357581 to order or contact supplychaincustomerservice@dm.duke.edu with the SAP#, quantity, cost center, and delivery address if they utilize Buy@Duke. For assistance with disability accommodations, please contact Leigh Fickling with the Disability Management System.

