



Masks, Masking the Facial Expression and Lip Reading: Added Burden for Hearing Impaired during COVID-19

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Received: April 20, 2021

Published: April 26, 2021

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The confirmed cases of COVID-19 are increasing in India even after more than a year of the pandemic (as of April 19, 2021). The standard preventive measures to fight against the virus are to wear face mask, social distancing, frequent hand washing or sanitizing and to get vaccinated, if eligible. The masks act as a physical barrier to guard you and others from the infection. Un-doubtedly wearing a mask, especially if in close proximity to others, is imperative to break the chain and contain the spread of COVID-19. However false sense of security i.e. make people relaxed in compliance with other disease control measures like social distancing or hand washing and incorrect use and disposal of face mask are of concern [1,2]. The other significant point of worry is that quality and the volume of speech between two mask wearing individuals is considerably compromised and thus hearing even in a normal hearing person [2].

Masking is challenging for each person for different reasons, but it is even for difficult for person with hearing loss in a number of ways: 1) unable to access the facial expressions 2) lip-reading is not possible as is vital for communication 3) masks muffle the high frequency portions of sound that are essential to speech [3]. The World Health Organization in June, 2020 also pointed out that masking in medical care settings presents probable harms that should be considered when caring for members of different populations, including the deaf and hard of hearing community [4].

As no one knows, when the situation will be back to normal and till what period masking will be mandatory, so some way-outs and alternatives should be looked for accessing the visual clues by hard

of hearing persons. Some suggested are: Use of face masks with transparent windows by communication partners which could help in lip reading 2) Use of transparent face shields which allow access to facial expressions and lip movements [5]. 3) Arranging virtual (video) consultations for medical aid so that they can lip read and understand from facial expressions 4) Use of smart phones, laptops or visuals and symbols, paper and pens for communication. During these tough times of COVID-19 pandemic, the hearing-impaired persons must be taken special care so that in the times of social distancing, they are connected to family, friends and the society. The joint efforts of family, friends and medical professionals may help to ease the situation, as is aptly said by Helen Keller "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much" [3].

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