

# Kids may find masks uncomfortable, but they'll be vital to stopping COVID-19 in schools, says expert <sup>[1]</sup>

Without a vaccine, masks are part of toolkit to curb virus spread: Jason Kindrachuck

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## EXCERPTS

Kids may find wearing masks uncomfortable, but if they're heading back to school, it's important to help them get used to them, says one expert.

"We have to figure out a mechanism to teach kids how to do this, because it is going to be imperative for us to be able to add this on as another component on top of things like ... ventilation, keeping kids distanced," said Jason Kindrachuck, assistant professor in emerging viruses at the University of Manitoba.

Kindrachuck said that while research suggests the virus doesn't seem to affect children's health as severely as it can with adults, we don't yet know what that means for how children could spread the virus to other people.

"We don't have a vaccine," he told *The Current's* guest host Duncan McCue. "This is our means right now of being able to curb the virus from spreading."

Last week, Canada's chief public health officer Dr. Theresa Tam suggested physical distancing and mask-wearing measures could be in place for the next two to three years, and recommended masks for schoolchildren over the age of 10.

Globally, countries that contained COVID-19 cases quickly were able to reopen schools in late spring. Denmark was among the first to reopen in April, with other countries in Europe and Asia following suit in May and June.

Outbreaks related to schools reopening in those countries were rare, partially because community transmission rates were already low. By contrast, rates are still high in the U.S., where a Georgia school has reported an outbreak one week after resuming classes.

With the new school year weeks away, schools in Europe and Asia are now forgoing many of the stricter measures from last term — though masks are required in many Asian countries (where they were already widely worn), and will be optional in much of Europe.

In Canada, federal guidelines suggest provinces consider the use of masks in schools, but say non-medical masks should not be worn by anyone who is "unable to remove the mask without assistance, due to age, ability or developmental status."

**Across Canada, the following guidelines and requirements have been announced for the new school year:**

- Ontario: Masks required for children in Grades 4 to 12.
- Alberta: Masks required for children in Grades 4 to 12 when in hallways, common areas, or working closely with others.
- Nova Scotia: Mandatory for high schools students in hallways, common areas and on school buses, but not in class.
- Quebec: Students from Grade 5 and up will have to wear masks in hallways, common areas and on school buses, but not in class.
- Northwest Territories: Students may be asked to wear masks in situations where physical distancing is not possible.
- Saskatchewan: The province has not made masks compulsory, but some school boards are strongly recommending them.

Masks have not been made compulsory for students in B.C., Saskatchewan, Yukon, Nunavut, Prince Edward Island, or Newfoundland and Labrador, while the issue is under consideration in Manitoba and New Brunswick.

## Masks 'hard to breathe' in, says student

Aubrey Kogucki will have to wear a mask when he heads into Grade 6 in Toronto in September.

He told *The Current* that he finds wearing masks hot, "hard to breathe [and] also, kind of, like, weird."

Kindrachuck said he wears one every day at work and can "completely sympathize, they are not comfortable."

"I agree they are not designed for comfort, they are a reminder for us that times are not normal," he said.

With a 22-month-old at home, Kindrachuck said he appreciates "how stubborn [children] can be."

"There is no easy solution for how to do this universally with kids," he said.

"Masks are not going to be the absolute magic bullet in stopping transmission, but they do have an importance in the role that they play for reducing transmission."

#### **Start wearing masks now: doctor**

Dr. Nisha Thampi agreed that it can take time for kids to get used to wearing a mask, but these final weeks of summer could be used to help make it "more comfortable to wear a mask indoors."

"We've got a few weeks before the start of school to trial various types of masks and practise wearing it," said Thampi, medical director of infection prevention and control at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, and an assistant professor at the University of Ottawa.

"Some families are getting their kids to wear a mask when they're watching watching TV or when they're doing their work," she said.

Grade 6 student Aubrey expressed concern over wearing masks during lunch, and Thampi agreed "it is complicated and, really, impossible to eat lunch without removing our masks."

"So in those situations, it is important to maintain physical distancing," she said.

Schools should have clear rules in place, she added, and look at additional measures such as plexiglass dividers at lunch tables or desks.

"Look at various strategies such that kids and staff are not in close contact when we know their masks are down, and they will be potentially spreading droplets."

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