

“Did you get that?”

Helping others hear while staying safe

Infection control measures present serious challenges to communication with patients and coworkers alike. A surgical mask covers the face and prevents lip-reading, something even “normal hearing” people rely on to understand speech. The mask also attenuates the volume of some speech sounds by half (more so with an N95 mask). Maintaining a two-metre distance makes listening even more challenging because the volume of speech diminishes with distance.

Here are some tips to make communication more effective –

- Reduce background noise as much as possible
- Get the person’s attention before you start speaking
- Face the person while speaking
- Slow your rate of speech by 10%
- Use short sentences and take short pauses between sentences
- Speak loudly and naturally but do not shout as this can distort speech
- Rephrase rather than repeat instructions that were not understood
- Ask for the person to repeat back what they understood instead of asking, “Did you understand?”
- Provide written materials

The prevalence of hearing loss is approximately 15% in adults¹ and rises with age. If the person you are speaking with has or seems to have a hearing loss –

- Ask them to put on their hearing aids or cochlear implant if available before you begin speaking
- Use a portable listening device such as a “Pocket talker”, ensuring appropriate infection control protocols
- Use text-to-speech apps on smart phones

When providing virtual care to patients –

- Use a quality microphone that can be worn close to the mouth without covering it
- Eliminate or reduce background noise
- Ensure that your face is well-lit and clearly visible
- Face the camera when speaking
- Use speech to text captioning

The easier it is to hear, the easier it can be to process and retain information.

St. Paul’s Hospital Audiology Department

Adapted from the Canadian Coalition for Adult Hearing Health

¹ Blackwell DL, Lucas JW, Clarke TC. Summary health statistics for U.S. adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2012 (PDF). National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Health Stat 10(260). 2014.