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Guidance

Face coverings: when to wear one, exemptions, and how to make your own

Updated 20 July 2021

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This publication is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own>

This page explains:

- what face coverings are
- the reason for using face coverings
- when you should wear a face covering
- how face coverings should be safely used and stored

This information is kept under constant review and is subject to change.

This information relates to the use of face coverings. It is important to follow all the other government advice on coronavirus (COVID-19), including how to stay safe and prevent the spread (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-coronavirus-restrictions-what-you-can-and-cannot-do>).

What a face covering is

In the context of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, a face covering is something which securely covers the nose and mouth. There are many types of face coverings available.

Cloth face coverings and disposable face coverings work best if they are made with multiple layers (at least 2) and form a good fit around the face.

Face coverings should be made of a material that you find comfortable and breathable, such as cotton.

Bandanas or religious garments may be used but are likely to be less effective if they do not fit securely around the face.

Face coverings are not classified as **PPE** (personal protective equipment) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-infection-prevention-and-control/covid-19-personal-protective-equipment-ppe>) which is used in a limited number of settings to protect wearers against hazards and risks, such as surgical masks or respirators used in medical and industrial settings.

Wearing a face covering can reduce the risk to others and yourself against the spread of infection because they cover the nose and mouth, which are the main confirmed sources of transmission of the virus that causes coronavirus infection (COVID-19).

You are expected and recommended to continue wearing a face covering in crowded and enclosed spaces where you come into contact with people you don't usually meet. In particular, where the risk of transmission is likely to be greater.

Find out more about the differences between surgical face masks, **PPE** face masks, and face coverings (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/regulatory-status-of-equipment-being-used-to-help-prevent-coronavirus-covid-19?utm_source=Gov&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=MHRA_COVID-19_updates&utm_content=HCP7#face-masks-and-face-coverings).

The reason for using face coverings

When someone with COVID-19 breathes, speaks, coughs or sneezes, they release particles (droplets and aerosols) which may contain the virus that causes COVID-19. These particles can be breathed in by another person.

Surfaces and belongings can also be contaminated with COVID-19 when people who are infected cough or sneeze near them, or if they touch them after coughing or sneezing onto their hands.

By covering your nose and mouth with a face covering, you'll reduce the spread of droplets and aerosols carrying the virus by limiting the amount of the virus being released when you talk and breathe, helping to protect others.

It is important to follow all the other government advice on COVID-19.

You and your household should self-isolate at home if you develop any of the most important symptoms:

- a new continuous cough
- a high temperature
- a loss of, or change in, your normal sense of smell or taste (anosmia)

You should arrange to have a PCR test (<https://www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test>) to check for COVID-19. Wearing a face covering does not change this.

If your test is positive, you must self-isolate until 10 days after the day on which you first developed symptoms.

When you should wear a face covering

From 19 July 2021, there is no longer a legal requirement to wear face coverings in indoor settings or on public transport.

Lifting restrictions does not mean the risks from COVID-19 have disappeared, but at this new phase of the pandemic response we are moving to an approach that enables personal risk-based judgments.

While no situation is risk free, there are actions we can take to protect ourselves and others around us.

We expect and recommend that members of the public continue to wear face coverings in crowded and enclosed spaces where you come into contact with people you don't normally meet. For example, on public transport.

You should use your judgement in deciding where you should wear one. Businesses, including transport operators, can also ask their employees and customers to wear face coverings. You should check with operators of services, venues, and settings that you use.

The Department for Transport has updated its guidance on safer travel for passengers (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-travel-guidance-for-passengers>).

Infection Prevention Control (IPC) guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-infection-prevention-and-control>) advises that patients and visitors across all healthcare settings should wear a face covering, providing it is tolerated and is not detrimental to their medical or care needs. They should also be worn in care homes to protect residents from the risk of infection.

The Department for Education (DfE) has its own guidance on the use of face coverings for schools and other education institutions that provide education for secondary school-age pupils, young people and adults in England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-in-education>).

You can find out more about the different rules across the UK on the relevant regional websites:

- Northern Ireland (<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/covid-19-information-public#face-coverings>)
- Scotland (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-public-use-of-face-coverings/>)
- Wales (<https://gov.wales/face-coverings-guidance-public>)

Face visors, shields and transparent face coverings

A face visor or shield only provides limited protection compared to a face covering. This is because they do not adequately cover the nose and mouth, and do not filter airborne particles.

Transparent face coverings can aid communication for those that require lip-reading or facial expressions. However, their effectiveness is not supported by evidence.

To be most effective, a face covering should fit securely around the face to cover the nose and mouth. It should be made of a breathable material capable of filtering airborne particles.

If you're not able to wear a face covering

Face coverings are expected and recommended in indoor spaces where you come into contact with people you do not normally meet. However, there are some circumstances where people may not be able to wear a face covering.

Please be respectful of these situations. Some people are less able to wear face coverings. The reasons for this may not always be visible.

This includes (but is not limited to):

- children under the age of 11 (Public Health England does not recommend face coverings for children under the age of 3 for health and safety reasons)
- people who cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering because of a physical or mental illness or impairment, or disability
- where the putting on, wearing or removing a face covering will cause severe distress
- instances where people are speaking to or providing assistance to someone who relies on lip reading, clear sound or facial expressions to communicate
- to avoid harm or injury, or the risk of harm or injury, to yourself or others
- police officers and other emergency workers – this may interfere with their ability to serve the public

There are also situations when you may be asked to remove a face covering, for example:

- when in a bank, building society, or post office for identification purposes
- when asked to do so by shop staff or relevant employees for identification purposes, for assessing health recommendations (for example. by a pharmacist), or for age identification purposes, such as when buying age-restricted products, such as alcohol
- if required to receive treatment or services, for example when getting a facial treatment

Exemption cards

You are no longer legally required to wear a face covering in any setting. Therefore you do not need to rely on an exemption if you need one.

However, you may feel more comfortable if you can show something to reflect that you're not able to wear a face covering. For example, in circumstances where the government recommends and expects you to continue to wear face coverings such as in crowded and enclosed spaces like public transport.

If you have an age, health or disability reason for not wearing a face covering you do not need to show:

- any written evidence of this
- an exemption card

This means that you do not need to seek advice or request a letter from a medical professional about your reason for not wearing a face covering.

However, some people may feel more comfortable if they are able to show something that explains why they're not wearing a face covering. This could be in the form of an exemption card, badge or even a home-made sign.

Carrying an exemption card or badge is a personal choice and is not required by law.

If you wish to use an exemption card or badge, you can download an exemption card template (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own>).

You can then print these yourself or show them on a mobile device. Please note that the government is not able to provide physical exemption cards or badges.

If you use assistive technology (such as a screen reader) and need a version of these templates in a more accessible format, please email publiccorrespondence@cabinetoffice.gov.uk. Please say what format you need the template in and what assistive technology you use.

For exemptions in different parts of the UK please refer to the specific guidance for Northern Ireland (<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/covid-19-information-public#face-coverings>), Scotland (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-public-use-of-face-coverings/>) and Wales (<https://gov.wales/face-coverings-guidance-public>).

How to wear a face covering

Face coverings with multiple layers and which fit closely around the face work best. It is important that any face covering is worn correctly and handled with care. A face covering should:

- cover your nose and mouth while allowing you to breathe comfortably (a nose wire may help with fit)
- fit comfortably but securely against the side of the face
- be secured to the head with ties or ear loops
- be made of a material that you find to be comfortable and breathable, such as cotton
- ideally include at least 2 layers of fabric (the World Health Organization recommends 3, depending on the fabric used)
- unless disposable, it should be able to be washed with other items of laundry according to fabric washing instructions and dried without causing the face covering to be damaged. Single-use disposable masks should not be washed and reused

When wearing a face covering you should:

- wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser before putting a face covering on
- avoid wearing on your neck or forehead
- avoid touching the part of the face covering in contact with your mouth and nose, as it could be contaminated with the virus
- change the face covering if it becomes damp or if you've touched it
- avoid taking it off and putting it back on a lot in quick succession (for example, when leaving and entering shops on a high street)

When removing a face covering:

- wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser before removing
- only handle the straps, ties or clips
- do not give it to someone else to use
- if single-use, dispose of it carefully in a residual waste bin and do not recycle
- if reusable, wash it in line with manufacturer's instructions at the highest temperature appropriate for the fabric
- wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser once removed

Face covering rules for businesses, venues and the workplace

Businesses and employers must complete a risk assessment, and take reasonable steps to manage risks to the health and safety of their workforce and customers in their workplace or setting, including the risks of COVID-19.

Businesses can require or encourage customers, clients or their workers to wear a face covering.

When completing a risk assessment, you would need to consider the reasonable adjustments needed for staff and customers with disabilities.

If your business chooses to implement certain health and safety measures, you would need to consider carefully how this fits with:

- your business' general health and safety duties
- other obligations to staff and customers arising from employment rights and equalities laws

All businesses should follow the principles set out in the working safely guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-covid-19>).

Where businesses require their workers to wear face coverings there are some circumstances where people may not be able to wear a face covering. Businesses should be mindful and respectful of these.

If your workers (including contractors) or customers choose to wear a face covering, you should support them in using face coverings safely.

Normal policies relating to occupational workwear and **PPE** will continue to apply.

Buying and selling face coverings

Face coverings are being sold by a large number of retailers online and in store in the UK.

There are currently no mandatory UK product standards for face coverings. This is because of the complexity of the different contexts in which COVID-19 can spread and the rapidly changing and growing evidence based on the effectiveness of face masks and coverings.

Face coverings which are sold must meet the existing requirements of the General Product Safety Regulations 2005. Further details can be found in the Office for Product and Safety Standards (OPSS) guidance for manufacturers of face coverings (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/899806/Guidance-for-businesses-and-individuals-face-coverings-version-3.pdf).

Making your own face covering

If you want to make your own face covering (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-wear-and-make-a-cloth-face-covering/how-to-wear-and-make-a-cloth-face-covering>), instructions are widely available online. We do not endorse any particular method but be considerate of materials and fabrics that may irritate different skin types.

Evidence suggests that the risk of transmission may be reduced by using thicker fabrics or multiple layers. However, the face covering should still be breathable.

Children should make face coverings under the supervision of an adult. Their face coverings should be secured to the head using ear loops only.

If you would like more information on how to make a face covering with materials from around your home please visit the Big Community Sew (<https://www.bigcommunitysew.co.uk/>) website. Here you will find step-by-step video tutorials on how to make face coverings and other useful tips and advice.

Maintaining and disposing of face coverings

Do not touch the front of the face covering, or the part of the face covering that has been in contact with your mouth and nose.

Once removed, store reusable face coverings in a plastic bag until you have an opportunity to wash them. If the face covering is single use, dispose of it in a residual waste bin. Do not put them in a recycling bin.

Make sure you clean any surfaces the face covering has touched using normal household cleaning products. If eating in a cafe, for example, it is important that you do not place the face covering on the table.

Wash your face covering regularly and follow the washing instructions for the fabric. You can use your normal detergent. You can wash and dry it with other laundry. You must throw away your face covering if it is damaged.

The government has also published guidance on the safe disposal of waste (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-disposing-of-waste>) for the public and businesses.

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