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Guidance

Face coverings in education

Updated 8 January 2021

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This publication is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-in-education/face-coverings-in-education>

This guidance is under review following the Prime Minister's announcement on 22 February 2021 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-response-spring-2021>). We will update it shortly.

Main changes to previous guidance

We have updated this guidance to align with national restrictions.

Introduction

This guidance is intended to support early years and childcare providers, schools, including alternative provision, and colleges with new advice on the use of face coverings.

From 1 September new advice applies to the use of face coverings by staff and pupils in some schools, and to learners in further education. This guidance is for schools and other education institutions in England. There is separate guidance for early years and childcare providers (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-early-years-and-childcare-closures>).

All schools and other education settings opened fully this September (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools>). Returning to school is vital for children's education and for their wellbeing. Time out of school is detrimental for children's cognitive and academic development, particularly for disadvantaged children. This impact can affect both current levels of learning and children's future ability to learn, and therefore we need to ensure all pupils can return to school sooner rather than later.

The Chief Medical Officers from all 4 nations in the United Kingdom (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/statement-from-the-uk-chief-medical-officers-on-schools-and-childcare-reopening>) have made it clear that the overall risks to children from coronavirus (COVID-19) in relation to education settings is low and that the risks associated with not being in school certainly outweigh those of being in school.

This is guidance, not mandatory activity, and any legal exemptions that apply to the wearing of face coverings in shops and on public transport also apply to this new advice.

General approach to face coverings

The World Health Organisation published a statement on 21 August about children and face coverings (<https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-children-and-masks-related-to-covid-19>). They now advise that "children aged 12 and over should wear a mask under the same conditions as adults, in particular when they cannot guarantee at least a 1-metre distance from others and there is widespread transmission in the area."

Nationwide, the government is not recommending face coverings are necessary in education settings generally because a system of controls, applicable to all education environments, provides additional mitigating measures. Schools and colleges will have the discretion to require face coverings in indoor communal areas where social distancing cannot be safely managed if they believe that it is right in their particular circumstances.

Examples of where education leaders might decide to recommend the wearing of face coverings - for pupils, staff and visitors - in communal areas of the education setting include:

- where the layout of the school or college estate makes it particularly difficult to maintain social distancing when staff and pupils are moving around the premises
- where on top of hygiene measures and the system of controls recommended in the full opening guidance to schools (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools>) and FE colleges and providers (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-further-education-provision>), permitting the use of face coverings for staff, pupils or other visitors would provide additional confidence to parents to support a full return of children to school or college

In primary schools where social distancing is not possible in indoor areas outside of classrooms between members of staff or visitors (for example, in staffrooms), head teachers will have the discretion to decide whether to ask staff or visitors to wear, or agree to them wearing face coverings in these circumstances. But children in primary school do not need to wear a face covering.

It is vital that face coverings are worn correctly and that clear instructions are provided to staff, children and young people on how to put on, remove, store and dispose of face coverings (<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>) in all of the circumstances above, to avoid inadvertently increasing the risks of transmission.

Safe wearing of face coverings requires cleaning of hands before and after touching – including to remove or put them on – and the safe storage of them in individual, sealable plastic bags between use. Where a face covering becomes damp, it should not be worn and the face covering should be replaced carefully.

On the basis of current evidence, in light of the mitigating measures education settings are taking, and the negative impact on communication, face coverings will not generally be necessary in the classroom even where social distancing is not possible. There is greater use of the system of controls for minimising risk, including through keeping in small and consistent groups or bubbles, and greater scope for physical distancing by staff within classrooms. Face coverings can have a negative impact on learning and teaching and so their use in the classroom should be avoided.

National lockdown

National lockdown came into force on the 5 January 2021. Consistent with the World Health Organisation's advice, schools and colleges should take additional precautionary measures during this period of national lockdown

During national lockdown, in education settings where year 7 and above are educated, face coverings should be worn by adults (staff and visitors) and pupils when moving around indoors, such as in corridors and communal areas where social distancing is difficult to maintain. As in the general approach, it will not usually be necessary to wear face coverings in the classroom, where protective measures already mean the risks are lower, and they may inhibit teaching and learning.

Schools and colleges will need to communicate quickly and clearly to staff, parents, pupils and learners that the new arrangements require the use of face coverings in certain circumstances.

Access to face coverings

It is reasonable to assume that staff and young people will now have access to face coverings due to their increasing use in wider society, and Public Health England has made available resources on how to make a simple 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).

However, where anybody is struggling to access a face covering, or where they are unable to use their face covering due to having forgotten it or it having become soiled or unsafe, education settings should take steps to have a small contingency supply available to meet such needs.

No one should be excluded from education on the grounds that they are not wearing a face covering.

Exemptions

Some individuals are exempt from wearing face coverings

(<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>). For example people who cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering because of a physical or mental illness or impairment, or disability, or if you are speaking to or providing assistance to someone who relies on lip reading, clear sound or facial expression to communicate. The same exemptions will apply in education settings, and we would expect teachers and other staff to be sensitive to those needs.

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