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Guidance

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

Updated 22 April 2021

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This page explains:

- what face coverings are
- how face coverings can reduce the transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19)
- the settings in which they need to be worn
- how face coverings should be safely used and stored

This information is based on current scientific evidence and is subject to change.

This information relates to the use of face coverings in public spaces where social distancing is not always possible. It is important to follow all the other government advice on coronavirus (COVID-19), including staying safe outside your home (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-safe-outside-your-home/staying-safe-outside-your-home>).

What a face covering is

In the context of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, a face covering is something which safely 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.

Face coverings are instead largely intended to protect others, not the wearer, against the spread of infection because they cover the nose and mouth, which are the main confirmed sources of transmission of virus that causes coronavirus infection (COVID-19).

If you wish to find out more about the differences between surgical face masks, **PPE** face masks, and face coverings see the **MHRA**'s (Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency) regulatory status of equipment being used to help prevent coronavirus (COVID-19) (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).

Face visors, shields and transparent face coverings

A face visor or shield may be worn in addition to a face covering but not instead of one. This is because face visors or shields do not adequately cover the nose and mouth, and do not filter airborne particles.

Transparent face coverings may be worn by those who communicate through lip-reading or facial expressions. However, their effectiveness is not supported by evidence so the government does not recommend their use by the wider public at this time. In order to be most effective, a face covering should fit securely around the face to cover the nose and mouth, and be made of a breathable material capable of filtering airborne particles.

When to wear a face covering

There are some places where you must wear a face covering by law, unless you are exempt or have a reasonable excuse (see When you do not need to wear a face covering below).

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-phase-3-staying-safe-and-protecting-others/pages/face-coverings/>)
- Wales (<https://gov.wales/face-coverings-frequently-asked-questions>)

In England you must wear a face covering in the following indoor settings (examples are given in brackets):

- public transport (aeroplanes, trains, trams and buses)
- taxis and private hire vehicles
- transport hubs (airports, rail and tram stations and terminals, maritime ports and terminals, bus and coach stations and terminals)
- shops and supermarkets (places which offer goods or services for retail sale or hire)
- shopping centres (malls and indoor markets)
- auction houses
- premises providing hospitality (bars, pubs, restaurants, cafes), except when seated at a table to eat or drink (see exemptions)
- post offices, banks, building societies, high-street solicitors and accountants, credit unions, short-term loan providers, savings clubs and money service businesses
- estate and lettings agents
- theatres
- premises providing personal care and beauty treatments (hair salons, barbers, nail salons, massage centres, tattoo and piercing parlours)
- premises providing veterinary services
- visitor attractions and entertainment venues (museums, galleries, cinemas, theatres, concert halls, cultural and heritage sites, aquariums, indoor zoos and visitor farms, bingo halls, amusement arcades, adventure activity centres, indoor sports stadiums, funfairs, theme parks, casinos, skating rinks, bowling alleys, indoor play areas including soft-play areas)
- libraries and public reading rooms
- places of worship
- funeral service providers (funeral homes, crematoria and burial ground chapels)
- community centres, youth centres and social clubs
- exhibition halls and conference centres
- public areas in hotels and hostels
- storage and distribution facilities

You are expected to wear a face covering before entering any of these settings and must keep it on until you leave unless there is a reasonable excuse for removing it.

You should also wear a face covering in indoor places not listed here where social distancing may be difficult and where you will come into contact with people you do not normally meet.

Face coverings are needed in NHS settings, including hospitals and primary or community care settings, such as GP surgeries. They are also advised to be worn in care homes.

The Department for Education (DfE) has updated its guidance on the use of face coverings for schools and other education institutions that teach people in year 7 and above in England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-in-education>).

Enforcement measures for failing to comply with this law

Premises where face coverings are required should take reasonable steps to promote compliance with the law.

The police can take measures if members of the public do not comply with this law without a valid exemption and transport operators can deny access to their public transport services if a passenger is not wearing a face covering, or direct them to wear one or leave a service.

If necessary the police and Transport for London (TfL) officers have enforcement powers, including issuing fines of £200 (reduced to £100 if paid within 14 days) for the first offence.

Repeat offenders receiving fines on public transport or in an indoor setting will have their fines doubled at each offence.

After the first offence there will be no discount. For example, receiving a second fine will amount to £400 and a third fine will be £800, up to a maximum value of £6,400.

When you do not need to wear a face covering

In settings where face coverings are required in England there are some circumstances where people may not be able to wear a face covering.

Please be mindful and respectful of such circumstances. Some people are less able to wear face coverings, and the reasons for this may not be visible to others.

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 putting on, wearing or removing a face covering will cause you severe distress
- if you 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 – including if it would negatively impact on your ability to exercise or participate in a strenuous activity
- police officers and other emergency workers, given that this may interfere with their ability to serve the public

There are also scenarios when you are permitted to remove a face covering:

- if asked to do so in a bank, building society, or post office for identification

- if asked to do so by shop staff or relevant employees for identification, for assessing health recommendations (for example by a pharmacist) or for age identification purposes, including when buying age restricted products such as alcohol
- if required in order to receive treatment or services, for example when getting a facial
- in order to take medication
- if you are delivering a sermon or prayer in a place of worship
- if you are the persons getting married in a relevant place
- if you are undertaking exercise or an activity and it would negatively impact your ability to do so
- if you are an elite sports person, professional dancer or referee acting in the course of your employment
- when seated to eat or drink in a hospitality premise such as a pub, bar, restaurant or cafe. You must put a face covering back on once you finish eating or drinking

Exemption cards

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

- you do not routinely need to show any written evidence of this
- you do not need show 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 showing something that says they do not have to wear 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 exemption card templates (<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 (<http://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-staying-safe-and-protecting-others/pages/face-coverings/>) and Wales (<https://gov.wales/face-coverings-frequently-asked-questions>).

The reason for using face coverings

Coronavirus (COVID-19) spreads from person to person through:

- small droplets
- clouds of tiny airborne particles known as aerosols
- direct contact

These droplets can also be picked up from surfaces if you touch a surface and then your face without washing your hands first. This is why social distancing, regular hand hygiene and covering coughs and sneezes is so important in controlling the spread of the virus.

The best available scientific evidence is that, when used correctly, wearing a face covering may reduce the spread of coronavirus droplets in certain circumstances, helping to protect others.

Because face coverings are mainly intended to protect others from coronavirus (COVID-19) rather than the wearer, they are not a replacement for social distancing and regular hand washing. It is important to follow all the other government advice on coronavirus (COVID-19), including staying safe outside your home (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-safe-outside-your-home/staying-safe-outside-your-home>). If you have recent onset of any of the most important symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19):

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

you and your household must isolate at home: wearing a face covering does not change this. You should arrange to have a test to see if you have COVID-19 (<https://www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test>).

How to wear a face covering

Face coverings with multiple layers and which fit snugly 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 coverings at work

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (~~BEIS~~) has provided detailed guidance for specific workplace settings (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>). Employers must make sure that the risk assessment for their business addresses the risks of COVID-19, using ~~BEIS~~ guidance to inform decisions and control measures including close proximity working.

It is important to note that coronavirus (COVID-19) needs to be managed through a hierarchy or system of control, including social distancing, high standards of hand hygiene, increased surface cleaning, fixed teams or partnering, and other measures such as using screens or barriers to separate people from each other.

These measures remain the best ways of managing risk in the workplace, but there are some circumstances when wearing a face covering may be marginally beneficial and a precautionary measure; this will largely be to protect others and not the wearer. Normal policies relating to occupational workwear and ~~PPE~~ will continue to apply.

Staff in indoor settings

Face coverings must be worn by retail, leisure and hospitality staff working in any indoor area that is open to the public and where they're likely to come into contact with a member of the public. This includes:

- shops
- supermarkets
- bars
- pubs
- restaurants
- cafes
- banks
- estate agents
- post offices
- public areas of hotels and hostels

If these businesses have taken steps in line with Health and Safety Executive guidance for COVID-19 secure workplaces (<https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/working-safely/index.htm>) to create a physical barrier between workers and members of the public then staff behind the barrier will not be required to wear a face covering.

For other indoor settings, employers should assess the use of face coverings on a case-by-case basis depending on the workplace environment, other appropriate mitigations they have put in place, and whether exemptions or reasonable excuses apply.

Employees should continue to follow guidance from their employer based on a workplace health and safety assessment.

For recommendations and requirements in specific settings please check the government's workplace settings guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>).

Transport workers

Transport workers are not required to wear a face covering by law (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-transport-guidance-for-operators/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-transport-guidance-for-operators#face-coverings>). However, face coverings offer some benefits in situations where social distancing is difficult to manage. For example, when working in passenger facing roles, including when providing assistance to disabled passengers.

Public health advice is that staff wear a face covering when they are unable to maintain social distancing in passenger facing roles, recognising that there will be exceptional circumstances when a staff member cannot wear a face covering, or when their task makes it sensible (based on a risk assessment) for them not to wear a face covering.

Buying and selling face coverings

In the UK face coverings are being sold by a large number of retailers online and in store. Due to the complexity of the different contexts in which COVID-19 can spread and the rapidly changing and growing evidence base on the effectiveness of face masks and coverings, there are currently no mandatory UK product standards for face 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.

Emerging 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 and face coverings for children 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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