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2. Coronavirus (COVID-19) (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-taxon>)
3. Education, universities and childcare during coronavirus (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-taxon/education-and-childcare>)
4. Pupil wellbeing and safety during coronavirus (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-taxon/pupil-wellbeing-safety>)
5. Face coverings in education (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-in-education>)

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Guidance

Face coverings in education

Updated 24 May 2021

Contents

Summary

Who is this publication for?

Main changes to previous guidance

Introduction

What a face covering is

When to wear a face covering in education

Safe wearing and removal of face coverings

Access to face coverings

Exemptions

[Print this page](#)



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

Summary

This publication provides non-statutory guidance from the Department for Education. It is intended to support schools and further education (F.E.) providers with new advice on the use of face coverings.

Who is this publication for?

This guidance is for:

- schools, including special schools
- alternative provision
- 16 to 19 academies
- F.E. providers including general F.E. colleges, sixth-form colleges, special post-16 institutions, designated institutions, adult community learning providers and independent training providers

Main changes to previous guidance

We have made specific changes to the information on face coverings.

Introduction

Based on the current state of the pandemic and the positive progress being made, the additional precautionary measures put in place from the 8 March for public health reasons are no longer recommended. From 17 May, new advice applies to the use of face coverings by staff, pupils and students in schools and further education in England. This advice is in line with Step 3 of the roadmap.

Further information can be found in the guidance for schools

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools>), guidance for specialist settings (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-full-opening-special-schools-and-other-specialist-settings/guidance-for-full-opening-special-schools-and-other-specialist-settings>) and guidance for further education

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-further-education-provision/what-fe-colleges-and-providers-will-need-to-do-from-the-start-of-the-2020-autumn-term>). There is separate guidance for early years and childcare providers (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-early-years-and-childcare-closures/coronavirus-covid-19-early-years-and-childcare-closures>) and guidance for higher education (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-reopening-buildings-and-campuses>).

Implementing the system of controls creates a safer environment for staff, pupils and students where the risk of transmission of COVID-19 infection is substantially reduced. The use of face coverings in recommended circumstances is one element of the system of controls and must be implemented in line with other guidance.

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 advice.

Where something is essential for public health reasons, as advised by Public Health England (P.H.E.), we have said 'must'. Where there is a legal requirement, we have made that clear. This guidance does not create any new legal obligations.

What a face covering is

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a face covering is something which safely covers the nose and mouth. You can use reusable or single-use face coverings. You may also use a scarf, bandana, religious garment or hand-made cloth covering but these must securely fit round the side of 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 sources of transmission of virus that causes COVID-19 infection.

Further information can be found in the guidance on face coverings: when to wear one, exemptions, and how to make your own (<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>).

When to wear a face covering in education

As part of the Step 3 roadmap, it has been determined that it is no longer necessary to recommend the additional precautionary face covering measures that we recommended from the 8 March. The decision to lift further restrictions at Step 3 has followed a review of the latest data on infection and vaccination rates.

From 17 May, in line with Step 3 of the roadmap, face coverings will no longer be recommended for pupils and students in classrooms or communal areas, in all schools and **FE** providers. Face coverings will also no longer be recommended for staff in classrooms.

In all schools and **FE** providers, we continue to recommend that face coverings should be worn by staff and visitors in situations outside of classrooms where social distancing is not possible (for example, when moving around in corridors and communal areas).

Recognising that **FE** teaching environments are diverse and can include vocational and workplace training environments, **FE** providers have the discretion to recommend the use of face coverings by students and staff, if it is appropriate for their particular circumstances. **FE** providers may consider recommending the use of face coverings where teaching settings are more reflective of a workplace environment, such as a training kitchen. If your education setting operates commercial training environments, such as hairdressing, barbering and beauty salons, sports and fitness facilities or restaurants, they must comply with relevant sector guidance in working safely during (COVID-19) (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>) and the current restriction guidance.

The reintroduction of face coverings for pupils, students or staff may be advised for a temporary period in response to particular localised outbreaks, including variants of concern. In all cases, any educational drawbacks should be balanced with the benefits of managing transmission. The Local Action Committee structure (Bronze/Silver/Gold) should be used in such circumstances to reintroduce the use of face coverings. Immediate outbreak response (at the level of individual settings or a cluster of settings) remains for local Directors of Public Health to advise on.

Where our guidance recommends face coverings, transparent face coverings, which may assist communication with someone who relies on lip reading, clear sound or facial expression to communicate, can also be worn. Transparent face coverings may be effective in reducing the spread

of coronavirus (COVID-19). However, the evidence to support this is currently very limited. Face coverings (whether transparent or cloth) should fit securely around the face to cover the nose and mouth and be made with a breathable material capable of filtering airborne particles.

The main benefit from a transparent face covering is that they can aid communication, for example enabling lip-reading or allowing for the full visibility of facial expressions, but this must be considered alongside the comfort and breathability of a face covering that contains plastic, which may mean that the face covering is less breathable than layers of cloth.

Face visors or shields can be worn by those exempt from wearing a face covering but they are not an equivalent alternative in terms of source control of virus transmission. They may protect the wearer against droplet spread in specific circumstances but are unlikely to be effective in preventing the escape of smaller respiratory particles when used without an additional face covering. They should only be used after carrying out a risk assessment for the specific situation and should always be cleaned appropriately.

The use of face coverings may have a particular impact on those who rely on visual signals for communication. Those who communicate with or provide support to those who do, are exempt from any recommendation to wear face coverings in education settings or requirement in public places.

Schools and FE providers have duties to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils and students, to support them to access education successfully.

The following is a non-exhaustive list which provides examples of possible adjustments:

- the provision and effective use of assistive listening devices, such as radio aids
- an increased focus on the listening environment, minimising all unnecessary background noise - steps should be taken so that children with hearing loss are taught in classrooms with the best possible acoustic conditions
- allowing the use of speech-recognition apps on mobile devices and tablets in classrooms, taking into account possible variations in the effectiveness of such apps in different classroom situations
- additional communication support, including remote speech-to-text reporters or sign language interpreters

Where appropriate, education settings should discuss with pupils and parents the types of reasonable adjustments that are being considered to support an individual.

Safe wearing and removal of face coverings

Schools and FE providers should have a process for when face coverings are worn and how they should be removed, for example when pupils arrive at school. They should communicate this process clearly to students, staff and visitors and allow for adjustments to be made for those who may be distressed if required to remove a face covering against their wishes.

Safe wearing of face coverings necessitates:

- cleaning hands before and after touching face coverings, – including to remove or put them on
- safely storing face coverings in individual, sealable plastic bags between use
- not touching the front of face coverings during use or when removing them

Where a face covering becomes damp, it should not be worn, and the face covering should be replaced carefully. Individuals may consider bringing a spare face covering to wear if their face covering becomes damp during the day.

If pupils or students arrive wearing a face covering, settings must instruct them to:

- not touch the front of their face covering when removing it
- dispose of temporary face coverings in a 'black bag' waste bin (not recycling bin)
- place reusable face coverings in a plastic bag they can take home with them
- wash their hands again before heading to their classroom

Separate guidance is available on preventing and controlling infection, including the use of PPE, in education, childcare and children's social care settings.

Access to face coverings

It is reasonable to assume that people will now have access to face coverings due to their increasing use in wider society. 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>).

Settings should have a small contingency supply available for people who:

- are struggling to access a face covering
- are unable to use their face covering as it has become damp, soiled or unsafe
- have forgotten their face covering

Exemptions

Where face coverings are recommended there are some circumstances where people may not be able to wear a face covering.

This includes (but is not limited to):

- 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

The same exemptions will apply in education and childcare settings and you should be sensitive to those needs, noting that some people are less able to wear face coverings and that the reasons for this may not be visible to others.

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