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## Guidance

# Face coverings: when to wear one, exemptions and what makes a good one

Updated 27 January 2022

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## Introduction

This page explains:

- what face coverings are, including what makes a good one
- when you should wear a face covering
- what exemptions exist from having to wear a face covering
- the rules for face coverings in the workplace (for staff and employers)
- how face coverings can reduce the transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19)
- how face coverings should be safely used and stored

This information is based on current scientific evidence and is subject to change. It is important to follow the other government advice on 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) (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-coronavirus-restrictions-what-you-can-and-cannot-do>).

## Summary

In England, face coverings are no longer required by law.

The government suggests that you continue to wear a face covering in crowded and enclosed spaces where you may come into contact with other people you do not normally meet.

These changes apply to England only. You can find out more about the different rules across the UK on the relevant websites of the relevant nation:

- [Northern Ireland](https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-face-coverings) (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-face-coverings>)
- [Scotland](https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-staying-safe-and-protecting-others/pages/face-coverings/) (<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) (<https://gov.wales/face-coverings-frequently-asked-questions>)

## What a face covering is

In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, a face covering is something that safely covers the nose and mouth.

Face coverings are primarily worn to protect others because they cover the nose and mouth, which are the main sources of emission of the virus that causes coronavirus infection (COVID-19). They can also provide some protection to the wearer.

There are many types of face covering available.

## What makes a good face covering

Face coverings work best if they are made with multiple layers (at least 2 and preferably 3) and form a good fit around the nose and mouth.

Scarves, bandanas or religious garments are likely to be less effective if they do not fit securely around the mouth and nose, and are of a single layer.

valved masks or those with vents are not recommended as they do not filter exhaled air, so do not protect others.

## The difference between face coverings and face masks

Face coverings are not classified as [personal protective equipment \(PPE\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-infection-prevention-and-control/covid-19-personal-protective-equipment-ppe) (<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.

[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#face-masks-and-face-coverings) (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/regulatory-status-of-equipment-being-used-to-help-prevent-coronavirus-covid-19#face-masks-and-face-coverings>)

## When to wear a face covering

The legal requirement to wear a face covering no longer applies. However, the government suggests that you continue to wear a face covering in crowded and enclosed spaces where you may come into contact with people you do not normally meet.

Customers, visitors or staff may choose to wear face coverings in any setting.

Face coverings and face masks will continue to be required in health and care settings to comply with [infection prevention and control \(IPC\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-infection-prevention-and-control/covid-19-guidance-for-maintaining-services-within-health-and-care-settings-infection-prevention-and-control-recommendations) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-infection-prevention-and-control/covid-19-guidance-for-maintaining-services-within-health-and-care-settings-infection-prevention-and-control-recommendations>) and [adult social care](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-social-care-guidance) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-social-care-guidance>) guidance. This includes hospitals and primary or community care settings, such as GP surgeries. They must also be worn by everyone accessing or visiting care homes.

You are required to wear a face covering on entering these healthcare settings and must keep it on until you leave unless you are exempt or have a reasonable excuse for removing it. Examples of what would usually be a reasonable excuse are listed in the 'If you are not able to wear a face covering' section below.

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) (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-travel-guidance-for-passengers>).

The Department for Education has updated its [guidance on the use of face coverings for schools, early years settings, out of school settings, and further and higher education settings](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-local-restrictions-in-education-and-childcare-settings/contingency-framework-education-and-childcare-settings) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-local-restrictions-in-education-and-childcare-settings/contingency-framework-education-and-childcare-settings>).

## When you are not able to wear a face covering

Face coverings are no longer required by law in England, but remain a requirement under infection prevention control (IPC) guidance in healthcare settings. 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 (the UK Health Security Agency 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
- people for whom putting on, wearing or removing a face covering will cause severe distress
- people speaking to or providing assistance to someone who relies on lip reading, clear sound or facial expressions to communicate
- to avoid the risk of harm or injury to yourself or others
- police officers and other emergency workers, given that this may interfere with their ability to serve the public

## Exemption cards

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 to 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) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own>). You can 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](mailto: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.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-face-coverings) (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-face-coverings>).
- [Scotland](http://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-staying-safe-and-protecting-others/pages/face-coverings/) (<http://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) (<https://gov.wales/face-coverings-frequently-asked-questions>).

## Face coverings at work

### Staff and employers

Staff are not legally required to wear face coverings in the workplace but may choose to wear one.

Employers can also choose to ask their staff or customers to wear a face covering, even though they are not legally required. Consider encouraging the use of face coverings by staff in crowded and enclosed spaces where they may come into contact with other people they do not normally meet.

When deciding whether you will ask workers or customers to wear a face covering, you need to consider any reasonable adjustments needed for staff and customers with disabilities. You also need to consider carefully how this fits with other obligations to workers and customers arising from the law on employment rights, health and safety and equality legislation.

Some people are not able to wear face coverings, and the reasons for this may not be visible to others. Please be mindful and respectful of such circumstances. You will also need to consider carefully your obligations arising from equality legislation.

For advice on how to reduce the risk of COVID-19 in your workplaces, please [check the government's working safely guidance \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-covid-19\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-covid-19).

## Reducing risk

The government has provided [detailed guidance on reducing the risk of COVID-19 in workplaces \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19). Employers should consider this guidance when completing their health and safety risk assessment, to help them decide which mitigations to put in place.

## Further information

### The reason for using face coverings

COVID-19 spreads from person to person through:

- small droplets
- clouds of tiny airborne particles known as aerosols
- contact with contaminated surfaces

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. When in close contact, the larger particles can land in the nose or mouth of people nearby or be breathed in by another person. The smaller airborne particles can stay suspended in the air for some time and be breathed in. Viruses can also be picked up from the surfaces the particles land on if you touch that surface and then your face without washing your hands first. This is why regular hand hygiene is still important for controlling the spread of the virus as well as other winter bugs.

The best available scientific evidence is that, when used correctly, wearing a face covering will reduce the spread of coronavirus particles, helping to protect everyone.

It is important to follow all the other government advice to [help prevent the spread \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-coronavirus-restrictions-what-you-can-and-cannot-do\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-coronavirus-restrictions-what-you-can-and-cannot-do) of COVID-19. If you have recent onset of any of the most important symptoms of COVID-19:

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

you 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) (<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. When people choose to wear a face covering, we recommend that they wear the highest quality one available to them, which should fit tightly around the nose and mouth and contain multiple layers, as these provide greater protection.

A face covering should:

- cover your nose and mouth while allowing you to breathe comfortably (a nose wire may help with fitting)
- 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
- 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 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 to minimise potential contamination

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 responsibly
- 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

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

## Face visors, shields and transparent face coverings

face visor or shield may be worn in addition to a face covering but we do not recommend that they are worn instead of one. This is because face visors or shields do not 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. 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.

## **Buying and selling face coverings**

In the UK, face coverings are being sold by a large number of retailers online and in store. The evidence indicates that any face covering with a reasonable level of filtration and that is worn properly (worn when recommended, and covers the nose and mouth) can help to reduce the spread.

There are currently no mandatory UK product standards for face coverings.

Face coverings that are sold must meet the existing requirements of the [General Product Safety Regulations 2005](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2005/1803/contents/made) (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2005/1803/contents/made>). Further details can be found in the [Office for Product and Safety Standards guidance for manufacturers and makers of face coverings](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/opss-coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-business-and-local-authorities#opss-covid-19-guidance-for-businesses) (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/opss-coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-business-and-local-authorities#opss-covid-19-guidance-for-businesses>).

## **Using and safely disposing of face coverings**

You should wash and reuse cloth face coverings to prevent and reduce waste.

Wash your reusable 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.

You need to throw away used face coverings as they are damaged or single-use:

- dispose of them responsibly
- do not put them in a recycling bin as they cannot be recycled through conventional recycling facilities
- take them home with you if there is no litter bin – do not drop them as litter

You do not need to:

- put them in an extra bag
- store them for a time before throwing them away

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

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