

Coronavirus (COVID-19) (/coronavirus)

Guidance and support

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Guidance

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

Updated 10 December 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>

The government has announced that England will move to Plan B in response to the risks of the Omicron variant. [Find out what you must do 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).

This page explains:

- 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)
- what face coverings are, and how they 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 all the other government advice on coronavirus (COVID-19), including [how to stay safe and prevent the spread \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-coronavirus-restrictions-what-you-can-and-cannot-do\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-coronavirus-restrictions-what-you-can-and-cannot-do).

Summary

In England, face coverings are now required by law in most indoor public places and on public transport, including taxis – see the ‘When to wear a face covering’ section below.

Face coverings are not required in hospitality venues where food and drink are consumed (such as pubs, cafés and restaurants), or during exercise (such as gyms), including dancing (such as nightclubs).

Where a premises or part of a premises is being used for an event where the main activities include eating, drinking and dancing, face coverings are not required. Face coverings must be worn in communal areas of the premises not being used for the event, such as in a hotel lobby when an event is taking place in a conference room.

In indoor settings where a face covering is not legally required, you should still 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.

Some people, including children under 11, are exempt from having to wear face coverings in any setting. Furthermore, anyone with a health condition or disability, which means they cannot wear a face covering, has a reasonable excuse for not wearing a face covering.

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)

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 the 'When you do not need to wear a face covering' section below).

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

- shops and supermarkets (places which offer goods or services for retail sale or hire)
- auction houses
- post offices, banks, building societies, high street solicitors and accountants, credit unions, short-term loan providers, savings clubs and money service businesses
- estate and letting agents
- premises providing personal care and beauty treatments (barbers, hair salons, tattoo and piercing studios, nail salons and massage centres)
- pharmacies
- premises providing veterinary services
- retail galleries
- retail travel agents
- public facing funeral offices
- takeaways without space for consumption of food or drink on premises
- shopping centres (malls and indoor markets)
- community centres (including village halls), youth centres, members clubs and social clubs
- libraries and public reading rooms
- polling stations and premises used for the counting of votes
- places of worship
- crematoria and burial ground chapels
- visitor attractions and entertainment venues (museums, galleries, cinemas, indoor theatres, concert halls, cultural and heritage sites, indoor areas at aquariums, zoos and visitor farms, bingo halls, amusement arcades, adventure activity centres, indoor sports stadiums, funfairs, indoor theme parks, casinos, skating rinks, bowling alleys, indoor play areas including soft-play areas)
- public areas in hotels and hostels
- indoor areas of open-air sports stadiums
- public transport (aeroplanes, trains, trams, buses, coaches and ferries), taxis and private hire vehicles
- cars or small vans during any professionally delivered driving lesson, during any driving test, and during any practical test to qualify as an approved driving instructor
- heavy goods vehicle (HGVs) during any driving lesson and during any driving test
- driving theory test centres
- transport hubs (airports, rail and tram stations and terminals, maritime ports and terminals, bus and coach stations and terminals)
- motorway service areas

Staff within these settings, except some transport workers (see the 'Face coverings at work' section below), and those working in premises providing legal or financial services are required to wear face coverings when they are in a part that is open to the public and when they are likely to come into

close contact with members of the public, such as on a shop floor. Staff may also wear face coverings when working in settings where face coverings are not required, and businesses are encouraged to support them in doing so.

You are required to wear a face covering on entering any of these 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.

You should continue to wear a face covering in other indoor places, especially those that are crowded and enclosed and where you may come into contact with people you do not normally meet.

Face coverings are not legally required in hospitality settings given that they cannot be worn while eating and drinking. They are also not legally required in exercise facilities including gyms, dance studios, swimming pools or leisure centres (see the 'When you do not need to wear a face covering' section below).

Face coverings and face masks are needed in healthcare settings to comply with infection, prevention, control (IPC) guidance. This includes hospitals and primary or community care settings, such as GP surgeries. They should also be worn by everyone accessing or visiting care homes.

The Department for Transport (DfT) 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 (DfE) 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>).

Enforcement measures for failing to comply with this law

Settings in which face coverings are required must display signage or take other measures to ensure customers are aware of the requirement to wear a face covering on their premises where there is no applicable exemption or reasonable excuse.

The police and police community support officers can enforce compliance if members of the public do not comply with this law without a reasonable excuse. Transport operators can deny access to their public transport services, or direct someone to wear a face covering or to leave a service, if not wearing one without a legitimate reason. Local authority enforcement officers can also use their enforcement powers against businesses for failing to display appropriate signage or breaching the prohibition against preventing someone from wearing a face covering.

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

Repeat offenders receiving penalties for breaching the requirements to wear face coverings will have their penalty doubled for each subsequent offence.

After the first offence there will be no discount. For example, a second penalty would be £400, a third £800, up to a maximum of £6,400. Any penalties issued under the 2020 regulations that were in force until earlier this year will not count towards the accumulation of fines levied under the new regulations.

When you do not need to wear a face covering

Face coverings are only legally required in the settings listed in 'When to wear a face covering' section above. Settings which are exempt from wearing a face covering because it would not be practical to do so include:

- restaurants, cafés and canteens
- pubs, bars and shisha bars
- gyms and exercise facilities (including dance studios)
- leisure centres, swimming pools, and water and aqua parks
- photography studios
- nightclubs, dance halls and discotheques

Customers, visitors or staff may choose to wear face coverings in these settings. Businesses cannot prevent staff, visitors or customers from wearing a face covering in these settings if they choose to wear one, and it is an offence to do so.

Face coverings are also not required in premises or a part of a premises where the main activity is eating, drinking, exercising or dancing. This might include venues being used to host wedding receptions or some music events as well as restaurants, pubs, bars and nightclubs. This is because it is not practical for people to wear a face covering when eating or drinking, and it is not recommended that face coverings are worn when undertaking strenuous activity, including exercising and dancing.

Some wedding or hospitality venues might ask you to wear a face covering and you may still be required to wear a face covering in parts of the premises where the main activity is not taking place.

While not mandatory, you should continue to wear a face covering in indoor places, which are crowded and enclosed and where you may come into contact with people you do not normally meet.

Singing

There is a reasonable excuse for someone to remove a face covering when it is reasonably necessary for them to sing, for example, if they are singing as part of a choir, or during a service, rehearsal or for a performance.

This does not extend to circumstances where it is not reasonably necessary to sing. For example, it may not be reasonably necessary for someone to sing whilst shopping, on public transport, or whilst in an in-scope setting such as a cinema, theatre or library.

This change allows those who are taking part in activities where singing is reasonably necessary to choose to remove their face covering if they prefer while singing.

If you are not able 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 (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

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

- if asked to do so for identification in premises such as a bank, building society or post office
- 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
- in order to take medication
- when it is reasonably necessary to sing, for example – as part of a choir, service, rehearsal or performance

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 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 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.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 in indoor settings

Staff within a relevant place, except some transport workers and those working in premises providing legal or financial services, are required to wear face coverings when they are in a part that is open to the public and when they are likely to come into close contact with members of the public, such as on a shop floor.

For other indoor settings, employers and businesses should consider whether to ask their staff, customers or visitors to wear a face covering.

Employers and businesses should also be aware that staff may choose to wear a face covering in exempt settings listed in 'When you do not need to wear a face covering' above, even if not required, and it is an offence to prevent them from doing so.

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

Transport workers

Most transport workers are [not required to wear a face covering \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-transport-guidance-for-operators/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-transport-guidance-for-operators#face-coverings\)](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 particularly in crowded and enclosed settings.

Driving instructors and examiners acting in the course of a car or ~~HGV~~ driving lesson or test are required to wear a face covering.

Public health advice is that staff wear a face covering when they are in crowded and enclosed settings or in passenger facing roles – for example, when providing assistance to disabled passengers. It is recognised 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.

Employers

Staff working in relevant areas (including hospitality and gyms) where face coverings are not legally required can choose to wear a face covering. Employers and businesses in these areas cannot prevent staff if they choose to wear a face covering and it is an offence to do so. Employers and businesses should support people, including staff, if they choose to wear a face covering in these settings.

Employers can also choose to ask their staff or customers to wear a face covering, even if they are not legally required. When deciding whether you will ask workers or customers to wear a face covering, you need to consider the 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. Also, it is permitted to remove a face covering to communicate with people who rely on lip reading, facial expressions and clear sound.

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

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 nose and mouth. 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 [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.

Face coverings protect the wearer and others 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).

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>).

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
- close contact

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. Virus 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 may reduce the spread of coronavirus droplets, 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 coronavirus (COVID-19). 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 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. 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 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

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. 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. Due to the number of different ways in which COVID-19 can spread and the rapidly growing evidence about 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 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).

Making your own face covering

If you want to [make your own face covering \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-wear-and-make-a-cloth-face-covering/how-to-wear-and-make-a-cloth-face-covering\)](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. The government does not endorse any particular method, but you should 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 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 \(https://www.bigcommunitysew.co.uk/\)](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.

Reusing 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.

If 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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