


Guidance on masks and face coverings in primary care

Version 2

31 July 2020





The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) advises staff within primary care to consider wearing face masks whilst working where possible (if unable to maintain social distancing).

We also recommend that patients are advised to wear face coverings to protect staff and other patients when attending primary care where possible. It is imperative that consideration is taken by practices to make alternative arrangements for patients who are unable to wear a face covering due to personal, socioeconomic or health reasons, in line with government advice, and no patient should be denied access to care.

This document links to current government advice available relating to the use of face masks and face coverings in NHS services and sets out some provisional advice for their use primary care. Any suggested actions are at the discretion of the practice.

England

[Public Health England](#) guidance for primary and community health care providers in England (23 July 2020) recommends that in England:

- providers of primary and community health services should ensure that measures are in place so that all settings are, where practicable, COVID-secure, using social distancing, optimal hand hygiene, frequent surface decontamination, ventilation and other measures where appropriate
- where a setting cannot be delivered as COVID-19 secure through all other means, a local assessment may conclude that primary and community healthcare staff (both in clinical and non-clinical roles), when not otherwise required to use personal protective equipment, should wear a face mask; worn to prevent the spread of infection from the wearer
- where a COVID-19 secure environment cannot be maintained, patients and members of the public entering primary and community healthcare premises should be advised to use face coverings in line with government advice

Scotland

The Scottish government released [interim guidance \(23 June 2020\) that encourages the use of face masks in community hospitals and care homes](#). This guidance does not extend to primary care, although it does recommend that “Workers continue to be able to wear appropriate PPE according to their own professional judgement”.



Wales

[Public Health Wales guidance on Infection prevention and control](#) states that health and social care staff should wear a face mask in settings where direct care is provided within 2 metres.

[Further guidance on medical masks from the Welsh Government can be found](#) here (13 June 2020).

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland face coverings are advised in enclosed spaces. [The Public Health Agency Northern Ireland states that “It is strongly advised that you should think about using face coverings](#) in particular circumstances - short periods in enclosed spaces where social distancing is not possible. In practice, these circumstances will largely mean on public transport and in shops. The use of face coverings will not be mandatory.” A press statement from the Northern Ireland government (22 June 2020) “strongly advised” the use of face coverings for indoor visits.


What should we do in primary care?


1. Encourage patients to use face coverings when visiting general practice services, where possible.

Many practices already have information on their websites encouraging patients to wear face coverings when visiting services in general practice, where at all possible. This is up to the discretion and situation of the individual practice.

Practices can consider linking to guidance such as government [advice for people on how to make their own face coverings easily at home](#), using scarves or other textile items. Face coverings should cover the mouth and nose, whilst allowing the wearer to breathe comfortably and can be as simple as a scarf or bandanna that ties behind the head to give a snug fit. Some practices are using text messages or other communications to patients to inform and remind patients ahead of visits to general practice to wear face coverings.

Practices should be aware that some patients may find wearing face coverings difficult and should ensure that no patient is prevented accessing care by local guidance and practices. A message from NHS England and Improvement to primary care (22 June





2020) noted that; for some people, wearing a face covering may be difficult due to physical or mental health conditions – if, following current guidelines you have asked patients to wear face covering before entering the surgery, for these patients, other measures should be considered, for example timed appointments or being seen immediately on arrival. No patient should be denied access to care.

2. Make the practice COVID-19 secure

In line with the advice for secondary care, GP surgeries should, of course, ensure that measures are in place so that all settings are, where practicable, COVID-secure, using social distancing, optimal hand hygiene, frequent surface decontamination, ventilation and other measures where appropriate. Guidance on how to implement this safely in the workplace is here for [England](#), [Scotland](#), [Northern Ireland](#) and [Wales](#).

3. Ensure all staff understand the difference between face coverings and face masks

A face covering is for members of the public to protect others if you are asymptotically carrying the virus. A face mask is used as part of personal protective equipment as per national guidance across the [UK](#), or specifically for [England](#), [Scotland](#), [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#).

4. Ensure staff know how to wear a mask or face covering safely

Consider training or signposting staff to websites, always emphasising optimal hand hygiene.

5. Consider the impact of track and trace (England), test and protect (Scotland), test trace protect (wales) and contact tracing (NI) on your staff and workforce

If staff are unable to maintain social distancing on breaks, whilst in reception or small rooms, review the guidance above, aiming to ensure the workplace is COVID-19 secure. In addition to protecting ourselves and our patients, we must also prevent asymptomatic staff infecting each other. Consideration must be taken to determine how you will manage if one or more members of staff are asked to self-isolate if one becomes unwell and they are identified by contact tracing. It is important to note that if contacted by a contact tracer and you were wearing an appropriate mask as part of PPE you will not be asked to self-isolate.