

**From the Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michael McBride**



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

HSS(MD) 58/2020

FOR ACTION

Chief Executives, Public Health Agency/Health and Social
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All General Practitioners and GP Locums (for onward
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Dear Colleagues

**USE OF FACE MASKS/FACE COVERING IN ALL HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE
FACILITIES - UPDATED AS OF 11 AUGUST 2020**

Policy position

We have continued to keep emerging evidence about the benefits of face coverings under review. There is clear evidence for the protection offered against viral transmission by the judicious use of face masks and face coverings, and it is now appropriate to extend recommendations about their use to all healthcare settings in primary and community care where COVID-secure environments cannot be maintained through other means.

A COVID secure environment is described as one where 2m social distancing, optimal hand hygiene, frequent surface decontamination, ventilation and other measures are in place to prevent the spread of the virus.

In light of evolving evidence the Executive has now decided that members of the public must wear face coverings when in enclosed settings where social distancing cannot be maintained, this became a mandatory requirement from Monday 10 August 2020. This includes not only public transport or retail environments, but also any other settings where interactions with individuals from other households take place, including domestic settings and healthcare environments. There are exemptions for those with some underlying health problems.

There is evidence that community transmission of COVID-19 is rising at present and it is important to embed the cultural change required in relation to use of face coverings in advance of any potential resurgence in the coming autumn or winter.

In line with infection prevention and control guidance from Public Health England (PHE) in relation to COVID 19 and recent 'Principles for Visiting in Care Settings in NI' – the following recommendations for use of face coverings and face masks in all healthcare facilities/buildings should be considered –

- In first instance all efforts to maintain 2m distance should be made in all areas where possible and all mitigations to improve or comply with 2m distancing should be undertaken;
- All facilities and buildings should be risk assessed to ensure that they are COVID secure - enhance social distancing, optimal hand hygiene, use of screens or barriers to separate people, ensure good ventilation, promote remote and virtual working, ensure regular surface cleaning and use of environmental hygiene procedures, provide additional waste bins, guide movement around buildings supported by appropriate signage;
- Hand hygiene and high standard of infection control precautions including safe respiratory etiquette should be maintained i.e. '*catch it– bin it–kill it*', sneezing and coughing into arm; and
- Where there are times when maintaining a COVID Secure environment including a 2m distance is not possible, then a face covering or clinical grade face mask should be donned by all staff depending on the role and the working environment of the staff member.

Clinical and surrounding areas

The use of face masks by staff in clinical areas is covered by existing infection prevention and control guidance published by PHE. Staff should also wear face masks whilst undertaking roles such as checking drugs, undertaking handover and activities centered around the nurses station or other congregation areas such as treatment rooms or clean and dirty utility areas - where it may not be possible to maintain the required social distance.

Non-clinical areas

Staff should ensure that they adhere to the required public health measures in these areas, this includes maintaining strict social distance, ensuring that good hand and respiratory hygiene is practiced by all and that there is good ventilation.

These areas should be subject to regular environmental cleaning as per the Trust/organisation's cleaning policy, the frequency and quality of environmental cleaning should be assured.

Every effort should be made to ensure that the above public health measures are implemented in non-clinical areas, this includes implementation of robust social distancing and hygiene measures. Should the ability to maintain a COVID secure environment be compromised, a local risk assessment should be undertaken with actions arising clearly documented. In such circumstances, i.e. where a COVID

secure environment cannot be maintained, employers may choose to advise staff to wear face coverings/face masks.

Particular attention must be paid to rest and break rooms used by staff, this includes areas used by clinical and non-clinical staff. All staff must observe the behaviours required to maintain 2m social distancing. Social distancing in staff rooms can be achieved by ensuring that breaks are staggered and that several people are not using rooms concurrently. It is particularly important that such areas have a robust and recorded risk assessment and when it is deemed that the rest or break area is NOT COVID secure employers may advise staff to wear a face mask/face covering.

Staff should not be at work if they are symptomatic.

Waiting areas adjacent to clinical areas

These areas require particular attention with regard to social distancing, environmental cleaning and good respiratory and hand hygiene and ventilation.

These areas should be subject to regular environmental cleaning as per the Trust/organisation's cleaning policy, the frequency and quality of environmental cleaning should be assured.

In waiting areas where it proves impossible to maintain a COVID Secure environment and 2m social distancing (e.g. Emergency Department/GP waiting areas during periods of increased service demand) a risk assessment should be undertaken which considers the need for staff, including non-clinical staff, to wear face masks/face coverings and members of the public to wear face coverings.

Members of the public are advised to wear a face covering when attending a hospital or community facilities. They will be further advised by a care provider to wear a face covering if required and if a COVID secure environment is not achievable. This is likely to include but not limited to dental surgeries, primary care settings, outpatient settings and/or ED waiting areas.

Visiting health and care settings

Members of the public and staff who visit health and care settings should always be guided by the infection prevention/control and public health requirements in place for the particular setting. Further advice can be provided by the person in charge of the particular setting, facility or ward being visited.

The regional visiting policy has been updated, and while some restrictions have been lifted the overall intention remains to reduce footfall in all healthcare settings. The latest visiting guidance issued on 6 July 2020 requires people visiting health care settings (community, primary and secondary care) and care homes to wear a face covering. Such face coverings must be applied before entering the building and worn for the duration of the visit to the facility. Staff visiting these care settings should also wear face masks or face coverings.

There are some instances where it may be distressing for the patient, resident or service user to wear a face mask/face covering or to be in the presence of those wearing face masks/face coverings. In these cases advice should be sought from the person in charge of the facility and a risk based approach employed.

All settings, facilities and wards should be subject to regular environmental cleaning as per the Trust/organisation's cleaning policy, the frequency and quality of environmental cleaning should be assured.

Review

This guidance will be reviewed as new detail/evidence on COVID-19 emerges. As rates of COVID-19 change in both community and healthcare settings, and notably the nosocomial transmission of SARS-CoV-2 increases or decreases, the case for continued use of face masks and/or face coverings will be reviewed.

Please see attached questions and answers at Tab A.

Yours sincerely



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Chief Medical Officer

PROF CHARLOTTE McARDLE
Chief Nursing Officer

Enc

Circulation List

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Assistant Director Public Health (Health Protection), Public Health Agency
Director of Nursing, Public Health Agency
Assistant Director of Pharmacy and Medicines Management, Health and Social Care Board (*for onward distribution to Community Pharmacies*)
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Trade Union Side

This letter is available on the Department of Health website at
<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/professional-medical-and-environmental-health-advice/hssmd-letters-and-urgent-communications>

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Do I need to wear a face mask/covering on a hospital corridor?

Passing a person on a corridor where social distance is maintained does not require a face mask or covering. This will be subject to risk assessment by the Care provider.

Do I need to wear a face mask/covering in my GP practice?

Yes, you are asked to wear a face mask/covering in all waiting and treatment areas of all health and care facilities where social distancing may not be achievable.

What kind of face covering should I wear?

In line with WHO guidance your face covering should be triple layered cotton or polyester fabric which is washable. The covering should cover your nose and mouth.

Will I be provided with a face covering?

People attending GP practices, other community facilities and hospitals should provide their own. In exceptional circumstances staff will provide this.

What is the purpose of a face covering?

The purpose of a face covering is mainly to prevent the spread of the virus to others, though it will also provide some protection to the wearer.

If I was/am shielding should I wear a face covering?

Yes, this advice is for everyone.

What does this mean for home visits?

Face mask/covering should be used indoors for home visits if 2m distance cannot be maintained.

How should I apply, remove and take care of my face covering?

- Wash hands or use hand sanitiser before putting a face covering on, and after removing it.
- When wearing a face covering, avoid touching your face covering and face, especially eyes nose and mouth.
- Ensure it covers your nose and mouth and fits comfortably but securely against the side of the face.
- Avoid wearing around the neck or forehead.
- Do not give it to someone else to use.

- To store the face covering safely between use fold the outer surface inward and against itself to reduce contact with the outer surface; store in a clean sealable bag.
- Change your face covering if it becomes damp.
- Change and wash your face covering daily.
- If the material is washable, wash in line with manufacturer's instructions. .If it's not washable, dispose of it carefully in waste bin, followed by hand hygiene.