# Use of face coverings (England)

23 September 2020

As restrictions to prevent the transmission of coronavirus by people self-isolating are eased, the use of face coverings, as a preventative measure to stop virus spread, has been made mandatory on public transport, and in shops in England.

RNIB has issued the following information for blind and partially sighted people about wearing face coverings, and when exemptions to wearing one might apply.

It should be read alongside the [face coverings guidance](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#making-your-own-face-covering) in force in England on 22 September 2020. People should also stay up to date with [current government COVID-19 guidance](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus), as it is subject to change, particularly paying attention to advice on [staying safe outside your home](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-safe-outside-your-home/staying-safe-outside-your-home).

## Wearing a face covering

Face coverings do not replace existing guidance for [staying safe outside your home](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-safe-outside-your-home/staying-safe-outside-your-home), but they reduce the risk of passing on coronavirus when people are closer than two metres for extended periods. They are primarily intended to protect people around you when you talk, or if you cough or sneeze. As a secondary benefit they also provide some limited protection from infection by other people. Face coverings work best when everyone is wearing one.

Broadly speaking, you must wear a face covering when indoors or travelling with people from outside your household or support bubble, unless covered by [circumstances outlined in government face coverings guidance](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-you-do-not-need-to-wear-a-face-covering). There is a fine, up to a maximum of £6,400 for repeated offences, for failure to wear a face covering when required.

If you are working, you must follow your employer’s policy on the wearing of face coverings or visors.

You also need to wear a face covering when you are participating in sighted guiding with someone outside your household or support bubble for the whole time you are together.

Blind and partially sighted people have told us that they find socially distancing more difficult to maintain, and this can cause anxiety. If you can, it might be a good idea to use a face covering whenever you are out of the house, in case other people do get too close.

## Exemptions from using face coverings

The Government has clarified that people with a “vision impairment, with a restricted field of vision, particularly if any residual vision is at the lower edge of the normal field of view” can claim an exemption from using a face covering. The Government guidance also sets out that anyone with a legitimate reason for not wearing a covering due to their disability is exempt.

If you have problems with a face covering constantly impeding your useful vision when worn, you should experiment safely at home with different types to see whether one can be made to work, before using an exemption. A cloth face covering, or one purchased with an enclosed wire that you can mould to the shape of your nose, is less likely to impede your useful vision.

If you find that a face covering impedes your useful vision when carrying out specific tasks – for example, looking down to see stairs or steps – it would be reasonable to adjust or remove it for the duration of the task and then refit it as soon as is practical afterwards, remembering to sanitise your hands when done.

You should carry your face covering by its straps, if you remove it completely, and not put it down on a surface unless you have the means to clean the surface afterwards. If you need to store it, use a sealable plastic bag.

If you are having problems with condensation, you should try different ways of fitting the covering – for example, using one with an enclosed wire that you can mould to the shape of your nose, or by fitting the face covering before putting on your glasses. Condensation alone would not normally be a reason for declaring an exemption.

If you also have difficulty hearing, and need to ask someone to move or remove their face covering to see their mouth to lip read while you are talking to them, this is mentioned by the government as an acceptable use of an exemption. If you wear a behind-the-ear hearing aid, be careful not to catch it when removing your own face covering.

## Awareness of exemptions

The Government has produced indicators that you can print off and wear, or put on your phone to [show that you are exempt from wearing a face covering](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).This a personal choice, and is not required by law.

In addition, some bus companies have also produced cards that you can show to their staff to show that you have an exemption, so it might be worth checking with them in advance whether they have one. You also might want to mention your exemption when booking assistance for a train journey. If you are going to particular shops regularly, you might want to ask the managers of those shops how they are making staff aware of exemptions.

It is also important to be rigorous in following other government guidance on [staying safe outside your home](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-safe-outside-your-home/staying-safe-outside-your-home), if you are not wearing a face covering.

## Can I leave quarantine if I use a face covering?

No, wearing a face covering isn’t sufficient protection for people around you if you have the symptoms of COVID-19. You should [get a free NHS test](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/testing-and-tracing/get-an-antigen-test-to-check-if-you-have-coronavirus/) and, until you have confirmation of a negative result, or 14 days has passed, you, your household, and any household you have formed a support bubble with, should remain in quarantine.

## What about Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?

The regulations are slightly different in each devolved nation, but we would still advise wearing a face covering if you can, when you are in any enclosed space outside of your home, particularly when there are other people around.

## Contact

For further information please contact John Dixon, Policy and Campaigns Officer at john.dixon@rnib.org.uk.