

National Public Health Emergency Team

14 July 2020

Proposal recommending the mandatory use of face coverings in retail environments

Action required

- For noting
- For discussion
- For decision

DRAFT

Summary

Universal face coverings in the retail environment is strongly supported to facilitate opening up of society and easing of restrictions on population movements for the following reasons:

- (i) As countries ease restrictions there have been numerous examples of resurgence of reported cases of COVID-19
- (ii) There is increasing evidence of the contagiousness of asymptomatic infected people with resulting potential for transmission at a time when they are actively engaging with others.
- (iii) There is increasing empiric evidence that mask use plays a role in reducing transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus causing COVID-19.

Current measures and advice in relation to the use of face coverings in Ireland

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) provided guidance on the use of face coverings in its advice to Government in relation to the Roadmap for Reopening Business & Society on 4 June 2020. This guidance sets out circumstances under which the wearing of a non-medical face covering is recommended. These are:

- when using busy public transport
- when in indoor public areas including retail outlets
- by people visiting the homes of those who are cocooning;
- by people who are being visited in their homes by those who are cocooning;
- all visitors to residential care facilities;
- in indoor work environments where it is difficult to maintain 2 metre distance.

On foot of a NPHE recommendation of 11 June 2020, the Government launched a national awareness campaign to increase compliance with guidance and recommendations with regard to the use of face-coverings by the general public in retail outlets, on public transport and in other public locations in which it is difficult to maintain social distancing or where this distance cannot be guaranteed. Research conducted by Amarach on behalf of the Department of Health on 13 July 2020 indicates that 26% of people self-report wearing a mask 'every time' they shop while 29% self-report wearing a mask 'most of the time' when they shop.

At its meeting of 9 July 2020, the NPHE introduced additional recommendations on face coverings to further protect healthcare staff and vulnerable populations. It recommended that visitors and outpatients to hospitals, residential care settings, and community health services (e.g. general practice, dental practice, pharmacy services) should wear a face covering to reduce the likelihood of the spread of infection from the wearer.

In its advice, the NPHE has consistently recommended that the wearing of face coverings is an additional hygiene measure and should not take the place of good hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette and other personal protective public health measures. The NPHE has also emphasised that it is important to use face coverings properly, in line with the guidance on the *Use of Face Masks by the General Public* developed by the Health Protection and Surveillance Centre.¹

Mandatory wearing of face coverings on public transport

On 10 July 2020 the Minister for Health signed the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (Face Coverings on Public Transport) Regulations 2020 requiring the mandatory wearing of face coverings on public transport except where a person:

¹ HPSC, *Use of Face Masks by the General Public* accessed online on 13 July at <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/ppe/useoffacemasksbythegeneralpublic/Guidance%20on%20use%20of%20face%20masks%20by%20the%20general%20public.pdf>

- cannot put one on, wear or remove a face covering because of any physical or mental illness, impairment or disability or without severe distress
- needs to communicate with another person who has difficulties communicating
- removes the face covering to provide emergency assistance or to provide care or assistance to a vulnerable person
- removes the face covering to take medication.

In addition to the above, the Regulations do not apply to children under the age of 13.

WHO and ECDC recommendations on the use of face masks in the community

On 5 June 2020, the World Health Organization published updated guidance on the use of masks for control of COVID-19.² The guidance noted that while the widespread use of masks by healthy people in the community setting is not yet supported by high quality or direct scientific evidence that, to prevent COVID-19 transmission effectively in areas of community transmission, governments should encourage the general public to wear masks in specific situations and settings, such as shops or on public transport, as part of a comprehensive approach to suppress SARS-CoV-2 transmission.

In its publication, *Using face masks in the community*, the European Centre for Disease Control states that ‘the use of face masks in public may serve as a means of source control to reduce the spread of the infection in the community by minimising the excretion of respiratory droplets from infected individuals who have not yet developed symptoms or who remain asymptomatic’.³ The ECDC also recognises that it is not known how much the use of masks in the community can contribute to a decrease in transmission in addition to the other countermeasures. However, the ECDC do suggest that ‘the use of face masks in the community could be considered, especially when visiting busy, closed spaces, such as grocery stores, shopping centres, or when using public transport, etc.’ In line with the WHO, the ECDC advises that ‘the use of face masks in the community should be considered only as a complementary measure and not as a replacement for established preventive measures, for example physical distancing, respiratory etiquette, meticulous hand hygiene and avoiding touching the face, nose, eyes and mouth.

The role of masks in reducing transmission of SARS-CoV-2

Studies in Jena, Germany concluded that face masks reduce the daily growth rate of reported infections by around 40%⁴ A Covid-19 outbreak on the United States Naval aircraft carrier, the USS Roosevelt, resulted in approximately 25% of its 4200-member crew becoming infected over the course of a three-month voyage from January to April 2020.⁵ Of 382 crew members surveyed, 60% had evidence for Covid-19 infection. A face covering was worn by 81% of those not developing infection, and 56% of those who became infected. Thus, use of a face covering was significantly associated with a decreased risk of becoming infected (OR 0.3, 95% CI 0.2 to 0.5). This study suggests that face coverings can also provide protection to the wearer.

A Cochrane review of different physical measures to prevent the acquisition of respiratory viruses found face masks to be the most effective of all measures investigated - including social distancing.⁶

While a number of countries, including England, France and Spain, recommend the use of face coverings in public spaces such as retail outlets, other countries have gone further and mandated the

² WHO, *Advice on the use of masks in the context of COVID-19* accessed online at <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks>

³ ECDC, *Using face masks in the community*, accessed online on 13 July at <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/using-face-masks-community-reducing-covid-19-transmission>

⁴ Mitze, T., Kosfeld, R., Rode, J., Wälde, K. (2020) Face Masks Considerably Reduce COVID-19 Cases in Germany: A Synthetic Control Method Approach. IZA –Institute of Labor Economics, Contract No.: IZA DP No. 13319. Available at: <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/13319/face-masks-considerably-reduce-covid-19-cases-in-germany-a-synthetic-control-method-approach>

⁵ Payne, D., Smith-Jeffcoat, S., Nowak, G., Chukwuma, U., Geibe, J., Hawkins, R. et al. (2020) SARS-CoV-2 Infections and Serologic Responses from a Sample of U.S. Navy Service Members - USS Theodore Roosevelt, April 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. doi: [10.15585/mmwr.mm6923e4](https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6923e4)

⁶ Kenyon, C., 2020, *Widespread use of face masks in public may slow the spread of SARS CoV-2: an ecological study*. medRxiv.

wearing of face coverings when in public. Scotland, Slovenia, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Luxembourg, Poland, the UAE and Qatar all mandated the wearing of masks in public at different stages.⁷ In mid-June, the Governor of California issued an order requiring Californians to wear face coverings in public in response to a rise in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the state.

Recommendation

The use of face masks by the general public has been considered by the NPHET on an on-going basis. Recognising the advice of the WHO and the ECDC, the NPHET recommends that the use of face coverings in retail environments be made mandatory. In so doing, the NPHET recognises that the use of face masks is one in a combination of preventive measures, including handwashing, respiratory etiquette and physical distancing, that must be used to reduce the risk of transmission of SARS-CoV-2. Staff should be required to wear face coverings unless there is a partition between the person or employee and members of the public, or a distance of at least two metres is maintained between the person or employee and members of the public. The NPHET also recommends that members of the public follow the guidance of the HPSC on the use of face masks by the general public.

⁷ HIQA, *Review of international public policy responses to easing restrictions introduced to limit the spread of COVID-19* accessed online at <https://www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/2020-07/Review-of-public-policy-responses-to-easing-COVID-19-restrictions-08-July.pdf>