



COVID-19

Interim Guidance on the use of face coverings in Childcare and Educational Settings

This document summarises u p d a t e d interim recommendations for the use of face-coverings in childcare and educational settings during the COVID-19 pandemic based on government advice issued on 30/11/2021. This interim guidance updates the earlier guidance on face coverings only All other interim recommendations for childcare and educational settings, still apply

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide interim guidance for childcare and educational settings regarding the use of face-coverings for staff and children in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rationale for the use of face-coverings in childcare and educational settings in the context of COVID-19

Although children are more likely to have mild or asymptomatic infection, meaning that infection may go undetected or undiagnosed, the Health Information Quality Authority (HIQA) Expert Advisory Group provided advice to the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) on 16th September 2021 regarding the minimum age for the use of face masks/coverings. This update is as a result of the current high incidence rate of COVID-19 in children aged 5-12 years. While very few significant outbreaks of COVID-19 in schools have been documented thus far, they do occur, and may be difficult to detect due to the relative lack of symptoms in children.¹

Cloth face-coverings act as a barrier to help prevent liquid respiratory droplets from traveling into the air and onto other people when the person wearing the cloth face covering coughs, sneezes, talks, or raises their voice.

SARS-CoV-2 the virus which causes COVID-19 - is a new virus. The virus is spread mainly through the air from the respiratory tract (nose or mouth) of a person with the infection. The virus can reach the respiratory tract mucosa (eyes, nose and mouth) of a susceptible person in two ways:

1. Travelling directly through the air to the respiratory tract or
2. Indirectly as a result of contamination of hands or other surfaces and subsequent transfer to the respiratory mucosa.

The risk of transmission through the air is dependent on a number of factors and include, how much virus is being shed by the infectious person, how close the susceptible person is to the infectious person, how forcefully the infectious person is scattering particles (for example, when the infected person coughs, sneezes, talks, sings, shouts or laughs) and what barriers are in place (e.g. masks).

There is now evidence from several studies ²⁻¹⁴ that transmission of SARS-CoV-2 can occur from pre-symptomatic (someone who has not yet developed symptoms) and asymptomatic (someone who never develops symptoms) persons. **Cloth face coverings are therefore intended to prevent transmission of the virus from the wearer (who may not know that they are infected) to those with whom they come into close contact.**

Recommendations for use of face-coverings in childcare and educational settings

In childcare and educational settings, the implementation of mandatory face-covering usage is challenging, as it is known that children will have a lower tolerance and ability to use the face covering properly, and use of face-coverings by teachers and staff caring for very young children may cause undue stress to the children. However, following government advice issued on 30/11/2021, with respect to the minimum age for the application of face masks/coverings and the current high incidence rate observed in children aged 5-12 years, particularly those aged 9 years and upwards, the NPHET and government recommends subject to the development of appropriate guidance, **the wearing of face masks/coverings in children in the following situations:**

- Children aged 9 years and over on public transport, in retail and other indoor public settings, with exemptions as appropriate;
- Children in third class and above in primary educational settings
- It is recommended that teachers and staff in primary educational settings wear a face-covering when a physical distance of 2 meters from other staff or children cannot be maintained.
- It is recommended that teachers, staff and students attending secondary schools wear a face-covering when a physical distance of 2 meters from other staff or students cannot be maintained.
- In certain situations, the use of clear visors should be considered, for example staff interacting with students with hearing difficulties or learning difficulties. However, it is accepted that visors are less effective than face-coverings in preventing transmission.
- All children on the post primary school transport scheme and all children in third class and upwards on the primary school transport scheme should be asked to wear face coverings unless there is a good reason not to do so.

Cloth face coverings should not be worn by any of the following groups:

- Children aged < 9 years of age in primary educational settings or pre-school.
- Any person with difficulty breathing or other relevant medical conditions.
- Any person who is unconscious or incapacitated.
- Any person who is unable to remove the face-covering without assistance.
- Any person who has special needs and who may feel upset or very uncomfortable wearing the face covering, for example persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities, mental health conditions, sensory concerns or tactile sensitivity.

Practical Considerations

- All staff and students wearing face coverings should be reminded to not touch the face covering and to wash or sanitize their hands (using a hand sanitizer) before putting on and after taking off the face covering.
- Information should be provided on the [proper use, removal, and washing of cloth face coverings](#)(click on this link).
- All teachers and staff should be aware that they should wash or sanitize hands (using a hand sanitizer) before and after helping a student put on or adjust a face covering.
- Face coverings should be stored in a space designated for each student that is separate from others when not being worn (e.g., in individually labelled containers or bags).
- Cloth face coverings should be washed after every day of use and/or before being used again, or if visibly soiled.
- Face coverings should not be worn if they are wet. A wet cloth face covering may make it difficult to breathe. Schools should consider having additional disposable face coverings available for students, teachers, and staff in case a back-up face covering is needed during the day

References

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