Covid-19: wearing a mask at work

12 May 2020

Scope of document

This document is intended to clarify information about wearing face coverings (masks or respirators) in the workplace in the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic. It does not offer advice or information for those who are working in direct contact with Covid-19 patients (eg care workers, hospital staff).

It has been written based on research from documents sourced from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, the World Health Organisation, and the UK Government. All references can be found in footnotes and at the end of the document.

Face coverings / masks

The most effective protective measure against catching or transmitting Covid-19 remains social distancing. The Government has published guidance which advises: "*people should aim to wear a face-covering in enclosed spaces where social distancing is not always possible and they come into contact with others that they do not normally meet, for example on public transport or in some shops.*"[1]

Reasons to wear a face covering:

There are two distinct reasons to wear a face covering or mask in the context of Covid-19:

1. **Protection**: to protect the wearer from catching the virus from others. **Protection** is usually the reason that a respirator is used as PPE in a workplace – to prevent the wearer inhaling of dust, fumes, etc.

2. **Source control**: to prevent the wearer infecting others (even in asymptomatic* or pre-symptomatic cases the virus may be shed through exhaled droplets).

   The Government advice states that "Face-coverings are not intended to help the wearer, but to protect against inadvertent transmission of the disease to others if you have it asymptomatically."[2] (ie **source control**)

asymptomatic: the virus is present but there are no symptoms; pre-symptomatic: the contagious stage before symptoms appear.

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[1] HM Government, *Our plan to rebuild: The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy*, London, 2020, p.27

[2] HM Government, *Our plan to rebuild*, p.27

Types of face covering / masks

There are three main types of face covering available:

1. Medical / surgical mask: designed primarily for **source control** but may offer some protection to the wearer.

2. Respirator or filtering face piece (FFP): its primary function is **protection**. Those with an exhale valve do not offer source control since respiratory particles will be released when exhaling. A filtering face piece without an exhale valve will offer **source control** also.

3. "Community" mask or face covering: A mask made from fabric or paper to no prescribed standard. There appears to be no evidence whether or not they are an effective means of protection.[3] Limited evidence suggests that they are less effective than medical masks as source control.[4]

   The Government states that *"The evidence suggests that wearing a face covering does not protect you, but it may protect others if you are infected but have not developed symptoms."*[5]

Benefits and disadvantages of types of face covering in the workplace:

Face covering	Benefits	Disadvantages
Medical / surgical mask	• Designed as a means of source control • Disposable	• In short supply and should be reserved for healthcare systems • Limited protection to the wearer • Loose-fitting and possibly unsuitable for a job with physical movement. Adjustments will lead to increased touching of the face.
Respirator / FFP	• Offers source control if there is no exhale valve • Protection to wearer • Familiar to those on construction sites • Create a tight seal on the face • Disposable	• In short supply • Expensive • Presence of exhale valve means no source control
"community" mask	• Reusable • Readily available	• Little evidence to support whether it offers good source control; no evidence of personal protection level • Not manufactured to any standard • Washable nature may lead to contamination of other people / items • Varying levels of comfort • Recommended only for short duration, low risk, ie in the community while on public transport / in shops

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[3] European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, *Using face masks in the community,* ECDC, Stockholm, 2020, p.2
World Health Organization, *Advice on the use of masks in the context of COVID-19,* WHO, 2020, p.1
[4] European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, p.2
[5] HM Government, *Our plan to rebuild,* p.50

	Manufactured to standard	Personal protection	Source control	Disposable	Reusable
Medical mask	Yes	Limited	Yes	Yes	
FFP / Respirator with exhale valve	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	
FFP / Respirator without exhale valve	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Community mask	No	Maybe / No	Maybe		Yes

Use of face coverings at work:

Your working arrangements are, as always, subject to risk assessment. A risk assessment looks at the hazards and risks and enables the design of work procedures, based on a hierarchy of controls. The hierarchy of controls should always be applied from the top down – starting with trying to eliminate the hazard completely and, if this is not reasonably practicable, then exploring other ways to minimise the risk.

Hierarchy of controls example, in the context of Covid-19 in the workplace:

Hierarchy of control step	Example of what you or your employer may do
Eliminate the hazard	Close the workplace
Reduce the hazard	Work from home Don't work closely with others. Maintain 2m distance at all times. No physical contact. No face to face contact. Don't share equipment or facilities. Enhanced cleaning regime Good personal hygiene If 2m distancing cannot be achieved: Reduce frequency and duration that workers are within 2m of each other; Minimise the number of workers on a job; Ensure work is carried out side by side or facing away from one another.
Isolate the hazard	Keep those workers who have to work within 2m together Don't swop and change personnel between jobs and teams
Control	Ensure supervision is adequate if necessary to implement 2m distancing rules Consider administrative methods such as an authorisation process to control <2m working
Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)	To be used as a last resort. If <2m working is necessary and applying the hierarchy of controls does not reduce the risk of transmission of the virus sufficiently, use RPE and PPE.

If, after applying the hierarchy of controls, you cannot reduce the risk of transmission of the virus between workers in any other way, you must consider PPE. This includes respiratory protective equipment (RPE) – a mask or respirator.

The use of a respirator or mask as a measure against Covid-19 transmission is not recommended if 2m distancing is possible.

Choosing the mask / respirator / face covering

When choosing the type of RPE you need, you must consider what you are trying to achieve and examine the suitability of what is available.

Consider:

- A "community" mask or face covering cannot, strictly speaking, be deemed to be personal protective equipment - by the Government's definition it may offer protection to others against you exhaling the virus but there is limited evidence that it protects you from inhaling it from others.

- FFP2 respirators are deemed to be suitable protection against the virus but if your work ordinarily demands an FFP3 respirator, you should continue to use this as normal.

- "Masks" that are supplied and manufactured without any conforming to any European or US standard may not offer the protection or source control that they claim.

- Respirators with an exhale valve are not effective source control – that is, if you have the virus but are unaware, you will be exhaling the virus outside of the mask.

Using the mask / respirator / face covering

If wearing a tight-fitting respirator, you should ensure that it provides a good fit and a tight seal around your face. Face fit testing is not possible with current social distancing rules in place, but the guidance from the HSE in Appendix 1 will help.

Ensure that behaviour is not changed by wearing a mask - employees must still observe social distancing rules and good personal hygiene and try not to touch their face.

Ensure that personnel take extreme care when removing the mask or respirator. It must be removed without touching the front of it, using the straps (see pictures below) and disposed of immediately and hands thoroughly washed.

HSE

Using disposable respirators

Pre-use checks

■ You should be clean-shaven around the face seal to achieve an effective fit when using disposable respirators. Beards and stubble will stop the disposable respirator sealing to your face and protecting you properly

■ Make sure it is the right disposable respirator for your work and for you - have you passed a face fit test in this disposable respirator?

■ Make sure the disposable respirator is clean and undamaged before you use it

■ Follow the manufacturer's instructions for checking the disposable respirator and putting it on

■ Check the fit every time you put on the disposable respirator to ensure there are no leaks

Putting the disposable respirator on and checking it fits

1 Cup the disposable respirator in one hand, with the straps hanging out of the way.

2 Hold the disposable respirator in place on your face.

3 Pull the bottom strap over your head, to the back of your neck.

4 Pull the top strap over your head to sit above your ears.

5 Check the straps are not twisted. If you need to tighten the straps, pull both ends at the same time, bottom first, then top.

6 If there is a nose clip, press this firmly to the shape of your nose.

Clean shaven?

Edges tight?

Nose clip shaped?

Chin snug?

Straps in place?

7 Before entering the workplace, a user seal check should be carried out. This is done by placing your hands over the filter material and breathing in. The mask should suck down onto your face when you breathe in sharply. You should hold your breath for ten seconds and the disposable respirator should not loosen. If it does, you should readjust and repeat.
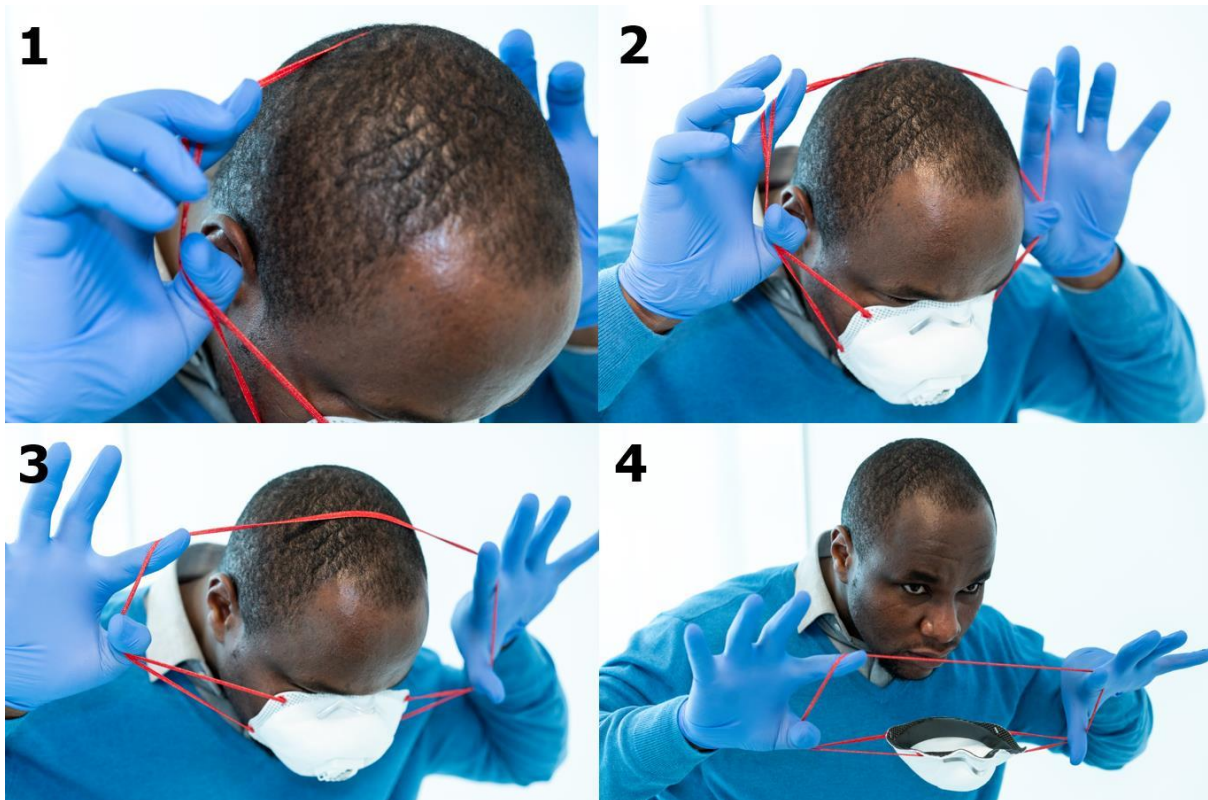
Check your disposable respirator before you put it on. **Then do a pre-use seal check or fit check - for a proper seal each time:** Clean shaven? Edges tight? Chin snug? Nose clip shaped? Straps in place?

This poster illustrates a typical disposable respirator, there are many other types available. Follow the manufacturer's instructions on putting your type of disposable respirator on and checking it fits.

Visit **hse.gov.uk/respiratory-protective-equipment** for more information

Appendix 2: Removing your respirator

In order to remove the respirator, a finger or thumb should be placed under the straps in the back and the respirator taken off as shown here[6].

The respirator should be disposed of after removal. It is important to avoid touching the respirator (except for the elastic straps) during its removal.

Picture credit: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control

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[6] European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, *Guidance for personal protective equipment for the care of patients with COVID-19,* Stockholm, ECDC, 2020, p.12

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