



Frequently Asked Questions in relation to face masks/coverings in primary schools

Public Health have recommended that pupils in 3rd class to 6th class wear a face mask/covering while attending primary school.

1) What public health advice has changed in primary schools for the wearing of face masks/coverings?

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) has recommended the wearing of face masks/coverings by children in 3rd class and above in primary schools. This measure is a response to the very high case numbers in older primary school-age children and was considered by the NPHE as proportionate to the current level of risk posed by COVID-19. It has advised that this measure is being introduced on a temporary basis and is subject to review in mid-February 2022.

NPHE has also recommended the wearing of face masks/coverings by children aged nine years and above on public transport, in retail and indoor public settings, as already required for children aged 13 years and over.

Following the Government decision to accept the recommendation of NPHE, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) has issued updated interim guidance on the use of face coverings in childcare and educational settings as set out in the link below:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1f9ba-interim-guidance-on-the-use-of-face-coverings-in-childcare-and-educational-settings/>

It has been widely accepted by the school community during the course of the global pandemic, that public health measures are put in place to protect the health and

safety of the school community as a whole, that they are consistent with national health policy put in place by Government and that they should be followed.

This is a temporary public health measure, in the interest of protecting children and the school staff and the school community. Throughout the pandemic, the education sector has consistently drawn upon public health expertise for the protection of the entire school community.

2) What is the procedure where a child presents without a face mask/covering?

Where issues arise, schools will engage pragmatically and sensitively with parents to explore any particular difficulties arising for an individual child.

It is generally accepted by the school community that rules put in place to protect the health and safety of the school community should be followed. Every effort should be made to clearly communicate the public health reasons behind the wearing of a face mask/covering.

Face masks/coverings protect both the wearer and others around them. Cloth face masks/coverings are more effective than visors. In the limited circumstances where a cloth face mask/covering cannot be worn, clear visors may be considered.

Parents are encouraged to work with schools in a spirit of partnership and co-operation to ensure the safety of the whole school community.

In implementing the public health measure, it is not intended that any child will be excluded by the school in the first instance.

A solution-focused engagement between the school and the child's parents /guardians should take place with a view to resolving issues that may arise.

The Department will engage with schools to offer guidance and support to reassure parents and to help schools resolve any issues. Where significant issues have not

been resolved locally, contact should be made with the Department's COVID-19 support by email Covid19_alert@education.gov.ie or telephone 057 9324461 and an Inspector will provide further support.

These measures have been implemented successfully at post-primary since September 2020 and it is envisaged that they will operate successfully with the support of school communities in the primary school setting.

3) Do children who may have a difficulty wearing a face mask/covering require a medical certificate?

The following categories of children are exempt on medical grounds from wearing face masks/coverings; the categories include:

- any pupil with difficulty breathing or other relevant medical conditions
- any pupil who is unable to remove the cloth face mask/covering or visor without assistance
- any pupil who has special needs and who may feel upset or very uncomfortable wearing the cloth face mask/covering or visor, for example pupils with intellectual or developmental disabilities, mental health conditions, sensory concerns or tactile sensitivity.

It should also be noted that where a school is aware, having consulted with the parent/guardian that a child's needs are such that mask-wearing is not **appropriate**, no medical certification is needed.

4) Do pupils with a hearing impairment require adjusted arrangements to facilitate lip reading?

It is important to facilitate pupils who rely on lip reading as a means of communication. For example, visors should be considered where face masks/coverings present an impediment to communication for pupils with a hearing impairment. Schools are asked to use their judgement in such cases.

5) Are all school staff expected to comply with the new measures?

Yes. The Covid-19 Response Plan issued to schools in August 2021 states that school staff are obliged to keep themselves informed of the updated advice of the public health authorities and comply with same.

Wearing face masks/coverings – good practice guide

6) Should pupils have breaks from wearing face masks/coverings?

It is recognised that wearing a face mask/covering for long durations can be challenging for young children. Schools are advised to arrange regular breaks and facilitate children taking a break outdoors where possible.

7) Do pupils have to wear face masks/coverings while outdoors?

No it is not necessary for pupils to wear face masks/coverings outdoors.

8) Should pupils wear a face mask/covering while sitting at their desks for lunch or taking a drink during class?

Pupils do not have to wear a face mask/covering while eating their lunch at their desks or taking a drink during class.

9) What is the position in instances of mixed classes (3rd class and 2nd class)?

In instances where classes are mixed, and such a class comprises of pupils in 3rd class and 2nd class or a lower class, only pupils in 3rd class are required to wear face masks/coverings.

10) What is the position for children using school transport?

The guidance above applies to pupils from 3rd class and higher classes on the school transport scheme also. Children on Special Education Needs (SEN) transport in this age group are not required to wear a face mask/covering but may choose to do so, where it is safe and comfortable.

11) Notwithstanding the requirement for wearing face masks/coverings what is the key message to keep schools safe?

The wearing of a face mask/covering does not negate the vital message that children who have symptoms should not attend school.

Wearing face masks/coverings while engaged in school activities

12) Do pupils have to wear a face mask/covering at P.E.?

No it is not necessary for pupils to wear a face mask/covering while engaged in P.E. P.E. should be outdoors if the weather permits. Indoor spaces should be ventilated well.

13) Do pupils have to wear a face mask/covering while playing sport?

No, it is not necessary for pupils to wear a face masks/covering while playing sport.

14) Do pupils have to wear a face mask/covering while singing?

No. it is not necessary for pupils to wear a face mask/covering while singing. Pupils should remain in their pods and be socially distant while singing. The space should be ventilated well.

15) Do pupils have to wear a face mask/covering while playing a musical instrument?

No. it is not necessary for pupils to wear a face mask/covering while playing a musical instrument. Pupils should remain in their pods and be socially distant while engaged in this activity. The space should be ventilated well.