

# SEPS Guide to Face Coverings and Masks

## Introduction

During the current outbreak of Covid-19 there has been a lot of discussion about the use of different face coverings and how they might help reduce the spread of the virus through the population. This guide aims to clarify the difference between the types of face coverings you may have seen in use and when it is appropriate to use each type.

## Fabric Face Coverings and Face Visors

Fabric face coverings are the simplest type of face covering and can be produced by almost anyone using freely available patterns or improvised using scarves, handkerchiefs and other convenient fabrics. Religious face coverings that cover the mouth and nose are also considered appropriate face coverings.

Fabric face coverings are not always produced to a particular standard and are not considered to provide any protection to the wearer. On this basis they are not classified as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). They do however, help to reduce the spread of respiratory droplets created during breathing, coughing and sneezing and therefore make a small contribution to stopping the spread of Covid-19 through the population. They are considered to have a small effect on the overall spread of disease and are only effective in enclosed or crowded areas. Nonetheless they are considered a worthwhile tool in controlling exposure in the population at large when used appropriately.

**Note:** Flexible plastic face visors can also be used but are considered to be less effective as they do not fully cover the nose and mouth. Plastic face visors should only be used in enclosed spaces in conjunction with a fabric face covering worn underneath.

**Note:** Fabric face coverings can become contaminated over time and should be washed frequently. You must ensure you do not touch the outside of your face covering during or after use as this can lead to transfer of contamination from the covering to other surfaces (and vice versa).

## Medical / Surgical Facemasks

Single use medical / surgical facemasks are produced to a more consistent standard than fabric face coverings and are usually fitted with a flexible metal strip across the bridge of the nose to help achieve a snug fit. They may also in some cases provide a small degree of liquid splash protection for the user. However, although they do need to meet a certain standard, once again are not intended to protect the wearer of the mask. Rather they are designed to reduce the risk of the wearer passing an infection to those around them and should be worn under the same circumstances as fabric face coverings. As with fabric face coverings, the effect of wearing medical facemasks in guarding against viral spread is relatively weak but makes a useful contribution to reducing transmission in the population when worn in enclosed spaces or crowded areas.

**Note:** Medical facemasks should always be treated as single use masks and should not be worn more than once. Once worn, masks should be treated as if they were contaminated and disposed of appropriately. Remember to wash your hands before donning your mask and after removing it.

## Respirators, Dust Masks etc.

Filter respirators and disposable dust masks are classed as PPE. Their primary function is to protect the wearer from harm. Respirators and masks which meet the requirements of EN149:2001 are designed to protect against solids, water-based aerosols and oil-based aerosols and will provide the wearer with some protection from exposure to viral particles when worn correctly. However, they are usually intended to protect the wearer from exposure to hazardous particles during specific tasks depending on the type of filter used and the rating (P1 to P3). The need for respiratory protective equipment (RPE e.g. respirators) will be dictated by the hazards associated with the work being undertaken and will be determined by the associated risk assessment. Remember that if RPE is required to control risks under CoSHH you'll need to undergo a formal face fit test to make sure your mask provides the required level of protection.

**Note:** The Scottish Government have made it mandatory for members of the public to wear face coverings in certain enclosed public spaces including shops and on public transport. There are however a number of exemptions that apply (see FAQ for more details).

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **I've wearing my surgical facemask, does that mean I'm safe?**

No. Remember that fabric face coverings and medical masks don't provide you with any protection as such. They do however help to reduce the transmission of potentially infected droplets when an infected person breathes, coughs and sneezes so when everyone wears them the likelihood of community transmission drops.

### **Why don't we all just wear face masks or coverings whenever we're out and about?**

The evidence suggests that the risk of spreading the virus outdoors is very low unless people are together in a crowded place. Therefore, the use of a face covering under these circumstances doesn't provide any benefit. In enclosed areas and crowded places they are a useful tool in controlling the spread of the virus.

### **Who's exempt from wearing a face covering?**

Quite a few people don't have to wear face coverings including police officers, paramedics, shop staff who are separated from customers by a barrier and other people who can carry out their jobs while maintaining the required physical distancing. It's also considered reasonable not to wear one if you have a health condition that means wearing it would cause pain, difficulty, severe distress or anxiety.

It's also worth remembering that there are times when you might need to remove your face covering for example when eating / drinking, taking medication, communicating with someone who relies on lip-reading or when asked to do so by a relevant person such as a police officer.

### **When should I wear a face covering on University Premises?**

It is currently University policy that face coverings are required at all times in all buildings on campus, including teaching and study spaces, with the following exceptions:

- Individuals who are exempt from wearing a face covering for a medical reason
- Individuals who are working alone in offices
- Staff and students working in specialist facilities (e.g. laboratories) where a bespoke risk assessment has been undertaken

Staff, students and visitors are also requested to wear face coverings in outdoor settings where they are likely to be in close proximity with others. Members of the University community are asked to treat others with respect; if an individual is not wearing a face covering they may well have a medical reason for not doing so (see below). For further information see [Internal communication on face coverings \(6th October\)](#).

### **I saw someone not wearing a face covering what should I do?**

Remember that physical distancing, reduced occupancy and improved hygiene are our best tools in the fight against Covid-19. In areas where physical distancing is possible or for outdoors working they are not usually required. If you're working in close proximity with someone and think they should be using a face covering, ask them politely if they're able to wear one while physical distancing isn't possible. Remember that there may be plenty of reasons why someone isn't able to wear a face covering, the list above provides a few examples. In these challenging times it's important to remember to treat your colleagues with respect and not to jump to the conclusion that they are simply disregarding the guidelines.

### **My colleagues and I all wear respirators for our normal day to day work does that mean we can continue to work side by side as normal?**

No. For now, we're asking people to continue to observe physical distancing where possible even though we know this may be inconvenient. We realise that there are some tasks where people will need to work close to each other (e.g. manual handling of awkward or heavy items) but we recommend keeping all such tasks to the minimum duration. Remember that PPE is our last line of defence rather than our first.

### **Do I need to treat used face coverings as specialist waste?**

Single use face coverings are not considered clinical waste and should not be disposed of as such to avoid overwhelming our contractor. Nor can they be recycled and therefore should not be put in recycling bins (clear bags). Used face coverings should be disposed of in the general waste bins (black bags),