

Healthcare providers in England can still insist on masks after 19 July

Majority of GPs want face coverings to remain compulsory in healthcare settings, BMA survey finds

[Rowena Mason](#)

Hospitals, GPs and other health providers will still be able to require patients and visitors to wear masks unless they are exempt, after Public Health England (PHE) said existing guidance on Covid infection control will continue beyond 19 July.

Health providers have been pressing the government for clarity on the status of face coverings in hospitals and GP surgeries when legal requirements on mask-wearing will be lifted, with the NHS Confederation saying it wants mandatory mask-wearing to continue.

In response, PHE made clear on Tuesday that its infection prevention control (IPC) guidance is to remain in place, meaning the current situation on mask-wearing in health and care settings will continue.

Under the guidelines agreed by the four nations of the UK and put in place for the pandemic, it sets out the need for “use of facemasks/coverings by all outpatients (if tolerated) and visitors when entering a hospital, GP/dental surgery or other care settings”. It also recommends physical distancing of 2 metres and thorough hand hygiene, with “patients in all care areas still to be encouraged and supported to wear a face mask, providing it is tolerated and is not detrimental to their medical or care needs”.

The guidance also gives GP surgeries and hospitals the green light to continue with virtual appointments beyond the 19 July unlocking date.

“Where possible and clinically appropriate remote consultations rather than face to face should be offered to patients/individuals,” the guidance said.

No 10 said on Tuesday that the rules for face coverings would be different in health and care settings, compared with other public places.

Dr Susan Hopkins, PHE's Covid-19 strategic response director, said: "There is current IPC guidance in place in healthcare settings and both patient and staff safety must remain the highest priority. The guidance, which includes measures for both staff and visitors, covers appropriate use of face covering and social distancing. The guidance is under constant review based on available and emerging evidence."

A Whitehall source said the continuation of the Covid IPC guidance meant mask-wearing would effectively still be mandatory in hospitals.

Amid a lack of clarity about the rules, the Health Service Journal reported that numerous [NHS](#) trust chiefs were planning to insist public visitors continue to wear masks regardless of government advice.

Senior leaders, however, told the publication they expected continuing to enforce face masks for the public would create significant issues.

Some of the trusts that confirmed to the HSJ that they would insist on masks include Sherwood Forest hospitals foundation trust, Leeds teaching hospitals trust, Dorset county hospital FT, Northumbria Healthcare FT, George Eliot hospitals, Birmingham Women's and Children's hospital, South Warwickshire FT and Wye Valley trust.

A survey by the British Medical Association revealed that nine in 10 doctors – 91% – want face masks to remain compulsory in GP practices and other healthcare settings where practical when Covid restrictions are lifted.

Revealing the results of the survey of 2,500 doctors, Dr Chaand Nagpaul, BMA council chair, said: "If the prime minister does not continue to make mask-wearing mandatory, we will see a sustained and even steeper rise in infection rates across the summer and beyond, which will significantly impact on our NHS and result in more serious illness and hospitalisation. Simply 'expecting' people to wear one is not good enough and sends out a confusing mixed message to the public."

The NHS Confederation, which represents most NHS organisations that provide care, was on Tuesday night still calling for the government to make a "crystal clear" statement about the need for patients and visitors to wear masks in healthcare settings to prevent people getting confused.

Matthew Taylor, its chief executive, said: "Covid-19 has not gone away and although the vaccine is helping to reduce the severity and impact of the disease, we really do have to continue to be careful and try to protect ourselves and each other."

“We know that face masks are proven to reduce the spread of Covid-19, which is why the overwhelming majority of our members are urging the government to be crystal clear with the public and say that it is a mandatory requirement to wear a face mask in all healthcare settings. NHS leaders are very concerned that unless the message is simple and unambiguous people may get confused and make their own rules, which could put others at risk.”