



## **Mask wearing, Outbreak management and COVID-19 testing Q&A**

This question-and-answer document is from Hertfordshire's Public Health Team and was updated 31 March 2023 in response to changes in government guidance for adult social care on outbreak management and COVID-19 testing.

### **Q. Has the guidance changed on mask wearing and why?**

A. Yes on the 15 December 2022 the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) wrote out to all directors of Adult Social Care and Directors of Public Health. In the letter they set out plans to move from a universal mask wearing approach to a risk-based approach by the 22 December 2022. This means that masks no longer need to be worn all of the time, just in certain circumstances. This change has happened to ensure measures are proportionate while still balancing risks as we learn to live with Covid.

### **Q. What do I need to do if I suspect a COVID-19 outbreak?**

A. Care homes can initiate their own risk assessment to determine if positive cases are likely to be linked. Care homes can determine and implement proportionate and risk-based outbreak measures relevant to the individual setting. Settings should inform the HPT or other local partner of the outbreak.

### **Q. Do I still need to inform UKHSA HPT and the local authority if I decide I have an outbreak?**

A. Yes, you should still inform the HPT or other local partner of a suspected outbreak, but you are not required to wait for advice from the HPT should you feel able to initiate a risk assessment independently. You can also ask for further support where necessary from the HPT if you require further advice or if there are specific issues of concern

### **Q. Has there been a change to outbreak testing in the guidance?**

A. Yes, the DHSC has recommended changes which will take effect from the 3 April 2023. The Changes are based on the latest advice and evidence from the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) that indicates that the risk of harm from COVID-19 across adult social care has now been significantly reduced. This is due to high vaccination coverage amongst those receiving care, prior immunity, and access to COVID-19



treatments for those at the highest risk when appropriate. In a suspected or confirmed outbreak, there is no longer a need to test the whole home to identify COVID-19 cases. Instead, only the first 5 linked symptomatic residents should take a lateral flow test to assess if there is an outbreak if 2 or more residents display respiratory symptoms within 14 days. This is in addition to tests taken by any symptomatic individuals eligible for COVID-19 treatments. PCR tests are no longer advised. Further testing should only be done if advised by the local health protection team (HPT) due to specific issues of concern. There will no longer be separate testing guidance as this will merge into here [COVID-19 supplement to the infection prevention and control resource for adult social care - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-supplement-to-the-infection-prevention-and-control-resource-for-adult-social-care)

In addition to this, the admission to care homes guidance has changed and Individuals being discharged from hospital into a care home should be tested with a COVID-19 LFD test now (instead of a PCR) within 48 hours before planned discharge. This test should be provided and done by the hospital. Individuals admitted from the community or other care settings do not need to be tested before they are admitted into the care home at all now.

#### **Q. When do I not need to wear a mask?**

A. Care workers and visitors to care homes do not routinely need to wear a face mask at all times in care settings or when providing care in people's own homes

#### **Q. When do I need to wear a mask?**

A.

- As per the recommendations for standard precautions, type IIR masks should always be worn if there is a risk of splashing of blood or body fluids
- If the person being cared for is known or suspected to have COVID-19 (recommended Type IIR fluid repellent surgical mask)
- If the member of staff is a household or overnight contact of someone who has had a positive test result for COVID-19
- If the care setting is in COVID-19 outbreak
- If a care recipient is particularly vulnerable to severe outcomes from COVID-19 (for example, potentially eligible for COVID-19 therapeutics) mask wearing may be considered on an individual basis in accordance with their preferences
- Mask wearing may also be considered when an event or gathering is assessed as having a particularly high risk of transmission
- If the care recipient would prefer care workers or visitors to wear a mask while providing them with care then this should be supported



- Providers should also support the personal preferences of care workers and visitors to wear a mask in scenarios over and above those recommended in the guidance

### **Q. Do visitors need to wear a mask?**

A. Care homes should ask visitors to follow the same PPE recommendations as care workers, to ensure visits can happen safely, **noting that additional requirements for face masks may be in place if the care setting is in an outbreak.** This should be based on individual assessments, taking into account any distress caused to residents by use of PPE or detrimental impact on communication

In the event that visitors are being asked to wear face masks, children under the age of 11 who are visiting may choose whether to wear face masks. However, they should be encouraged to follow other IPC measures such as practicing hand hygiene. Face coverings for children under the age of 3 are not recommended for safety reasons

Visitors should not enter the care home if they are feeling unwell, even if they have tested negative for COVID-19, are fully vaccinated and have received their booster. Transmissible viruses such as flu, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and norovirus can be just as dangerous to care home residents as COVID-19. If visitors have symptoms that suggest COVID-19, they should avoid the care home until at least 5 days after they feel better.

### **Q. How do I wear a mask properly?**

A. All face masks should:

- be well fitted to cover nose, mouth and chin
- be worn according to the manufacturer's recommendations (check which side should be close to the wearer)
- not be allowed to dangle around the neck at any time, or rest on the forehead or under the chin
- not be touched once put on
- be worn according to the risk-assessed activity
- be removed and disposed of appropriately, with the wearer cleaning their hands before removal and after disposal

Face masks should be changed:

- if they become moist
- if they become damaged
- if they become uncomfortable to wear



- if they become contaminated or soiled
- at break times
- between different care recipients
- between different people's homes
- after 4 hours of continuous wear

**Q. Should I wash my hands every time I remove my mask?**

A. Yes. Every time you touch your mask and every time you remove it you should wash your hands. If you are out and about use hand sanitiser but still wash your hands when you can access running water.