

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Covid-19 response

Covid-19: Frequently asked questions to complement government guidance on face coverings

Contents

Introduction:	3
SECTION A: General questions on face coverings	4
Q1: What do you mean by ‘face covering’?	4
Q2: Where should I wear a face covering?	4
Q3: How can I make sure my face covering is clean?	5
SECTION B: The use of face coverings in the food production/handling environment	6
Q4: Should I wear my face covering at my place of work which is producing food products?	6
Q5: I use personal protective equipment (PPE) in my place of work, should I use a face covering instead?	6
Q6: Has the guidance changed for using PPE that I need in the normal course of my work in a food business?	7
Q7: If my employee is wearing a face covering in the community setting by choice how do I manage this as a food business operator in the work setting, i.e. when does the community setting become the occupational setting?	7
Q8: My employee wishes to wear a face covering at work to provide them with peace of mind as per the general Government Guidance, but our food safety risk assessments prohibit this. What considerations do I need to make?	8
Q9: I am confident that my Food Safety Management System and my Health and Safety Risk assessments indicate face coverings are not required for my employee but my employee does not agree. How can I convince my employee the work is safe?	8
Q10: How do I protect my employee from Covid-19 infection at my food business?	9

SECTION C: Use of face coverings in the retail environment..... 11

 Q11: How do I protect my customers from Covid-19 infection at my food business?..... 11

 Q12: Customers may enter my food business wearing face coverings, however my employees are not required to wear them. Where can I get information and guidance to differentiate between the community and workplace settings so customers can be assured they are safe?..... 11

 Q13: Do I need to take any additional measures to protect the food I produce and handle from COVID-19 infection? 12

SECTION D: Other questions 13

 Q14: Regarding Covid-19 are there any additional cleaning or sanitation measures required at my food business? 13

 Q15: My employee has symptoms of Covid-19 and wishes to continue working at my Food Business, what do I need to do? 13

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Introduction:

These FAQs are intended to assist those who are running food businesses to navigate government guidance on face coverings; they include some FAQs which employees may ask of their employer. Defra and the Food Standards Agency compiled these FAQs after stakeholders asked for further clarity on published guidance.

Food businesses are already required to conduct risk assessments that ensure the safety of the food products being made alongside the safety of the food handlers. This has not changed because of Covid-19.

There are web links to relevant publications on Gov.uk for each question and answer where food businesses can find more detail.

SECTION A: General questions on face coverings

Q1: What do you mean by 'face covering'?

A1: 'Face covering' means a covering of the mouth and nose, that is made of cloth or other textiles and through which you can breathe, for example a scarf or bandana. This can be used effectively as long as it covers the nose and mouth safely. After each use you must wash the face covering at 60 degrees centigrade or dispose of it safely.

Alternative types of face covering should:

- fit well but also comfortably against the side of the face;
- be secured to the head with ties or ear loops, where natural ties, such as with a scarf, don't apply;
- include at least 2 layers of fabric such as cotton;
- allow for easy breathing.

'Face covering' does NOT mean a surgical or other medical grade mask. Neither, does it mean an item of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as FFP2 or 3 respiratory masks which are used to manage work place risks like dust and spray in an industrial context.

Guidance on face coverings is provided in the Government's "Our plan to rebuild: The UK Government's Covid-19 recovery strategy" at section 7. This can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-plan-to-rebuild-the-uk-governments-covid-19-recovery-strategy/our-plan-to-rebuild-the-uk-governments-covid-19-recovery-strategy> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-wear-and-make-a-cloth-face-covering>;

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/factories-plants-and-warehouses>.

BEIS has addressed this in their guidance: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19> Section 6 of each workplace guide; also

[Find guidance on how to wear and make a face-covering on GOV.UK.](#)

Q2: Where should I wear a face covering?

A2: The public may consider wearing face coverings in enclosed public spaces such as shops, trains and buses to help reduce the spread of coronavirus. This could be where physical distancing is more difficult and where there is a risk of close contact with multiple people you do not usually meet, and it is not always possible to maintain 2 metres distance from another customer. There is no evidence to suggest there might be a general benefit outdoors, unless in an unavoidable crowded situation, where there may be some benefit.

Guidance can be found at section 7 of the document published here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-plan-to-rebuild-the-uk-governments-covid-19-recovery-strategy/our-plan-to-rebuild-the-uk-governments-covid-19-recovery-strategy>.

Q3: How can I make sure my face covering is clean?

A3: When applying or removing the covering, it is important that you wash your hands before and after, for at least 20 seconds with soap and water and avoid touching your face. After each use, you must wash the face covering at 60 degrees centigrade or dispose of it safely.

You can find guidance on keeping face coverings clean here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-wear-and-make-a-cloth-face-covering/how-to-wear-and-make-a-cloth-face-covering>;

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-safe-outside-your-home/staying-safe-outside-your-home>.

SECTION B: The use of face coverings in the food production/handling environment

Q4: Should I wear my face covering at my place of work which is producing food products?

A4: Food businesses are required to conduct risk assessments that ensure the safety of the food products being made alongside the safety of the food handlers. It is for the employer to provide advice to employees on whether they can/should wear face coverings. This needs to take into account health and safety of food handlers and the safety and integrity of the food produced.

Face coverings not mandated by your employer must not be worn on the premises, and must be stored or disposed of safely, in line with company procedures.

It is expected that most employers will be able to offer a working environment where the recommended 2 metres of social distancing can be achieved or other mitigating measures are in place. Businesses should make available their risk assessments to share with employees as required.

If a face covering is not permitted this is most likely to be due to the risk to the product being manufactured and the standard high hygiene levels of the food factory will provide protection to the employee along with other mitigations. Government advice is that the wearing of a face covering does not protect the wearer. More effective ways of managing risks presented by Covid-19 are to minimise time spent in contact with others (where possible) and by observing very high hygiene standards washing hands frequently for a minimum of 20 secs. Government has stated that it does not expect to see employers relying on face coverings as risk management for the purpose of their health and safety assessments.

Information on the FSA website here talks about risk assessments, PPE and adapting operations during COVID-19 : <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/adapting-food-manufacturing-operations-during-covid-19>

Guidance on the FSA website links to the gov.uk page on factories etc here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/factories-plants-and-warehouses>

Q5: I use personal protective equipment (PPE) in my place of work, should I use a face covering instead?

A5: You should follow the procedures established by your employer. It is for the employer to provide advice to employees on whether they can/should wear face coverings. This needs to take into account health and safety of food handlers and the safety and integrity of the food produced.

Guidance on adapting operations during COVID-19 can be found here:

- *Food manufacturing:* <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/adapting-food-manufacturing-operations-during-covid-19>
- *Farming and agriculture:* <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/adapting-agricultural-and-primary-production-operations-during-covid-19>
- *Restaurant and takeaways:* <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/adapting-restaurants-and-food-businesses-for-takeaway-and-food-delivery-during-covid-19>

Q6: Has the guidance changed for using PPE that I need in the normal course of my work in a food business?

A6: No, you should continue to ensure that the use of PPE is as set out in your Food Safety Management System (FSMS), and in line with your current Health & Safety at Work policies.

Q7: If my employee is wearing a face covering in the community setting by choice how do I manage this as a food business operator in the work setting, i.e. when does the community setting become the occupational setting?

A7: Your normal policies relating to occupational workwear and PPE continue to apply. These will have been established with regard to the safety and integrity of the food you produce and taking account of the health and safety of food handlers. You may have reviewed your policies and procedures in light of the current situation. If your assessment allows face covering to be worn in the workplace, you should put procedures in place for hygienic use, handling and storage or disposal of face coverings. Inappropriate use and handling could present a risk to food hygiene and safety. You should ensure requirements including any changes are clearly communicated to all staff, and training provided where required.

All employers are expected to follow social distancing guidance, including food businesses, as far as is reasonably possible. Where the production environment makes it difficult to do so, employers should consider what measures may be put in place to protect employees. Once staff have left the food processing areas and removed protective clothing, social distancing and further hand washing guidance should be adhered to.

Guidance on working safely in different settings can be found on gov.uk in the following locations:

- <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5eb97e7686650c278d4496ea/workin-g-safely-during-covid-19-offices-contact-centres-110520.pdf>;
- <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5eb965d5d3bf7f5d3c74a2dd/working-safely-during-covid-19-factories-plants-warehouses-110520.pdf>.

Guidance on hygiene can be found here:

- <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-hygiene>
- <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/safer-food-better-business>
- <https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/personal-hygiene-fitness-to-work.pdf>

Q8: My employee wishes to wear a face covering at work to provide them with peace of mind as per the general Government Guidance, but our food safety risk assessments prohibit this. What considerations do I need to make?

A8: You will need to consider whether the wearing of a face covering is compatible with your procedures as established in your FSMS. If face coverings are allowed employees must be trained effectively in putting them on, taking them off, safe disposal and required frequency of changing. Food safety practices in food processing plants should continue to be delivered to the highest hygiene standards including, more frequent handwashing and ensuring that objects and surfaces that are touched regularly, are frequently cleaned, and disinfected using your regular cleaning products.

Further guidance can be found at

- <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-hygiene>
- <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/safer-food-better-business>
- <https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/personal-hygiene-fitness-to-work.pdf>

Q9: I am confident that my Food Safety Management System and my Health and Safety Risk assessments indicate face coverings are not required for my employee but my employee does not agree. How can I convince my employee the work is safe?

A9: The key protective measures to avoiding Covid-19 are:

- Effective frequent handwashing for at least 20 seconds
- Maintaining distancing or mitigation measures
- Self-isolating and not going to work when symptomatic

Employers should also remind their employees that businesses conduct risk assessments for both the protection of the products being made and those manufacturing them. Both assessments need to be considered in setting expectations of practices within the food manufacturing environment.

The risk of contracting Covid-19 through the UK food chain is very low. There is currently no evidence to suggest transmission occurs through the foodborne route. Therefore, you are very unlikely to catch Covid-19 from food.

Based on the available information, three risks have been identified:

1. Risk from contaminated food – evidence suggests that the risk from contaminated food is very low. It is highly unlikely coronavirus can be spread through food, however, as with other infections good hygiene practices should be followed in food preparation.
2. Risk from infected food handlers – evidence suggest the main mechanism of transmission is human to human. All food workers should ensure the necessary personal and environmental controls are in place to prevent the transmission of pathogens through food, food preparation surfaces or food packaging, in line with their business' HACCP.
3. Risk from contaminated food contact materials - evidence suggests that the risk from food contact materials is very low. Good hygienic practices should already be in place during the manufacturing stages to significantly reduce the risk of contaminating any food contact materials and articles.

Additional information is available in the Food Standards Agency's [Qualitative risk assessment on the risk of food or food contact materials as a transmission route for SARS-CoV-2](#).

Sharing the results of your internal risk assessments with employees may reassure them that appropriate controls are already in place. Government guidance is that the results of a Covid-19 risk assessment are shared with workers and that the expectation is that all businesses with more than 50 employees publishes the risk assessment on their website

Further guidance can be found at:

- <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-hygiene>
- <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/safer-food-better-business>
- <https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/personal-hygiene-fitness-to-work.pdf>

Q10: How do I protect my employee from Covid-19 infection at my food business?

A10: Employers should stress the importance of more frequent handwashing and maintaining good hygiene practices in food preparation and handling areas. Employees should wash their hands for 20 seconds, especially after being in a public place, blowing their nose, coughing or sneezing.

Businesses can help reduce the spread of coronavirus by reminding everyone of the government's public health advice. [Posters, leaflets and other materials](#) are available online.

SECTION C: Use of face coverings in the retail environment

Q11: How do I protect my customers from Covid-19 infection at my food business?

A11: Customers should be encouraged to order online, by app, or by phone.

Customers waiting to order or collect should wait in a designated area where a 2-metre distance from other people can be maintained. If this is not possible, customers should enter the premises one at a time and only when their order is ready to be made or collected.

Collection times should be staggered to discourage crowding outside the premises. Where queuing is taking place, you should use queue management systems to maintain a 2-metre distance between people.

You may wish to signpost [government guidance](#) on wearing of face coverings and face masks by displaying signage in outlets.

Guidance on managing your customers can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/shops-and-branches>

Businesses can help reduce the spread of coronavirus by reminding everyone of the government's public health advice. [Posters, leaflets and other materials](#) are available online.

Q12: Customers may enter my food business wearing face coverings, however my employees are not required to wear them. Where can I get information and guidance to differentiate between the community and workplace settings so customers can be assured they are safe?

A12: You may wish to signpost [government guidance](#) on wearing of face coverings and face masks by displaying signage in outlets.

Customers should be encouraged to order in advance online, by app, or by phone.

Collection times should be staggered to discourage crowding outside the premises. Where queuing is taking place, you should use queue management systems to maintain a 2-metre distance between people.

Customers waiting to order or collect should wait in a designated area where a 2-metre distance from other people can be maintained. If this is not possible, customers should enter the premises one at a time and only when their order is ready to be made or collected. (See Qs 2 and 11 for relevant guidance)

Q13: Do I need to take any additional measures to protect the food I produce and handle from COVID-19 infection?

A13: It is very unlikely that you can catch coronavirus from food.

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness. It is not known to be transmitted by exposure to food or food packaging.

Any food handler who is unwell should not be at work. If they have symptoms, they should follow government advice and stay at home.

Although it is very unlikely that coronavirus is transmitted through food, as a matter of good hygiene practice anyone handling food should wash their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. This should be done as a matter of routine, before and after handling food, and especially after being in a public place, blowing their nose, coughing, or sneezing.

Food business operators should continue to follow the Food Standard Agency's (FSA) [guidance on good hygiene practices](#) in food preparation and their Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) processes.

Guidance is at <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-hygiene>.

SECTION D: Other questions

Q14: Regarding Covid-19 are there any additional cleaning or sanitation measures required at my food business?

A14: You should continue to comply with the general rules for food hygiene, you are required to have in place your own cleaning, disinfection and hygiene procedures as part of your Food Safety Management System (FSMS). This is essential to produce safe food and should reduce the risk of cross-contamination. This includes avoiding tainting and preventing microorganisms from spreading to food.

Additionally you should ensure that objects and surfaces that are touched regularly, are frequently cleaned, and disinfected using your regular cleaning products.

FSA guidance on cleaning and disinfection <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/cleaning-effectively-in-your-business>.

Q15: My employee has symptoms of Covid-19 and wishes to continue working at my Food Business, what do I need to do?

A15: If anyone becomes unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature in the business or workplace they should be sent home and advised to follow the stay at home guidance.

If they need clinical advice, they should go online to NHS 111 (or call 111 if they don't have internet access). In an emergency, call 999 if they are seriously ill or injured or their life is at risk. Do not visit the GP, pharmacy, urgent care centre or a hospital.

If a member of staff has helped someone who was taken unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature, they do not need to go home unless they develop symptoms themselves. They should wash their hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds after any contact with someone who is unwell with symptoms consistent with coronavirus infection.

Food businesses should ensure that food preparation surfaces continue to be thoroughly cleaned, in line with food hygiene practice and the environmental controls set out in their Food Safety Management System (FSMS) using Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles. Coronavirus (COVID-19) is not known to be transmitted by exposure to food so, it is not anticipated that food products would need to be recalled or withdrawn. Consider adjustments to fitness for work procedures to take account of COVID-19 symptoms and staff update training on this as required.

Guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>; <https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/personal-hygiene-fitness-to-work.pdf>.