

Face coverings no longer required in schools and colleges from 17 May

Pupils will no longer be required to wear face coverings in schools and colleges from 17 May, the Prime Minister has confirmed.

In a press conference this afternoon, the Prime Minister announced that the country's roadmap out of lockdown is on track and Step 3 will go ahead as planned on 17 May.

The latest data shows infection rates continuing to decrease, deaths and hospitalisations at their lowest level since July, and the vaccine rollout continuing at pace.

In line with this data, pupils will no longer be required to wear face coverings in the classroom or communal areas in schools and colleges. This will improve interaction between teachers and students, ensuring the clearest possible communication to support learning.

Transmission of the virus in schools continues to decrease in line with wider community transmission, with the latest statistics showing a significant drop in the number of teachers and staff testing positive.

The decision has taken into consideration the latest scientific evidence, medical advice and stakeholder feedback on the impacts of wearing face coverings in schools and colleges.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

Step three of the roadmap allows people to mix indoors once again and in line with the latest data, we no longer need to recommend that face coverings are worn in the classroom.

Over the past year we have always put the wellbeing of pupils and staff first, and this step is now the right one, as vaccinations protect the most vulnerable in society and we turn our attention to building back better from the pandemic.

Testing in schools and colleges continues to be important, so I urge all students, families and teachers to keep testing themselves twice weekly, to help reduce the risk of transmission.

John Simpson, Head of Public Health Advice, Guidance and Expertise Pillar (PHAGE) at Public Health England, said:

Scientific studies show that COVID-19 transmission in schools remains low.

This evidence has been reviewed alongside criteria for the wider easing of restrictions.

It's important to strike a balance between COVID-19 protection and student wellbeing and the guidance on face coverings for secondary school pupils has been kept under constant review.

Existing control measures in schools including good ventilation, handwashing, social distancing where possible and twice weekly testing remain hugely important.

Children's Commissioner Rachel de Souza, said:

The reopening of schools for all children has been so important and a real success, and I have been pleased to see so many children return to the classroom.

I am glad that the government has made the decision to remove face coverings in schools for pupils, based on the latest scientific advice. Wearing a mask during lessons has been one of many sacrifices children have made over the last year in our fight against the pandemic and I know they will welcome this latest step towards a return to normal school life.

The recommendation to wear face coverings in classrooms was introduced as a precautionary, temporary measure at a time where rates of coronavirus were high in the community, the school and college regular testing regime was about to begin, and the vaccine programme was in its early stages.

All other protective measures such as ventilation and social distancing where possible will remain in place and regular rapid testing will continue to help find and isolate asymptomatic cases when they do occur.

Staff are not required to wear face coverings in the classroom but should continue to wear them in communal areas such as the staff room, where social distancing may not be possible.

Today's updated guidance on how schools should operate from Step 3 of the roadmap also confirms that from 17 May, new residential educational visits can take place within the UK.

The Department recommends schools and colleges do not plan for international visits to take place up to and including 5 September, recognising the logistical difficulties that will remain in place this academic year regarding overseas travel with groups of children. The position beyond 5 September will be reviewed in advance of Step 4.

All measures in place for schools and colleges are kept under review based on the latest scientific and medical advice.

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