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Government makes wearing face masks mandatory

by Peter Blackburn

The Government has announced face coverings in England will be mandatory for people visiting shops – but only from 24 July.

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After weeks of uncertainty regarding the Government's position on the use of face masks – and regular demands for action from the BMA and other expert groups – prime minister Boris Johnson has finally mandated the use of masks, but with an 11-day delay.

The BMA has called for the Government to be decisive and bring the new policy into place immediately – and extend the rules to all places where social distancing cannot be maintained.

The Government's announcement comes on the same day a major survey by the BMA reveals thousands of doctors overwhelmingly support the move to require mandatory face coverings for all settings where social distancing is not possible.

More than 5,000 doctors in England and Wales took part in the survey and 86 per cent said it should be mandatory to wear face masks in settings where the public either cannot or will not social distance.

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The BMA believes face coverings should be mandatory in all scenarios where 2-metre physical distancing cannot be maintained between people from different households or 'bubbles', and there are no other mitigating measures in place, such as plastic screens.



Protect others, prevent the spread – wear a face covering



Since the early days of the pandemic, the BMA, analysing developing evidence, has said the wearing of nose and mouth coverings helps control the spread of infection and so saves lives.

BMA council chair Chaand Nagpaul said: 'For months doctors at the BMA have called on the Government to stop equivocating and to ask people to wear face coverings over their mouths and noses in public places where they cannot safely socially distance. Up until now the Westminster Government has refused to put in place this logical policy to prevent spread of the virus, and which has been the norm in around 120 countries globally including most of Europe – so this step is long overdue.

'However, why is it waiting another 11 days to implement this policy, when the risk from COVID-19 remains present right now? This needs to happen immediately given that each day that goes by adds to the risk of spread and endangers lives. The BMA also believes that the wearing of face coverings should be extended to all settings where people cannot maintain physical distancing.

'The latest Office of National Statistics figures suggest there are 1,700 new cases of coronavirus in England daily, which shows a lot more needs to be done



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NHS as we approach the winter period.'

Lower risk

Dr Nagpaul added: 'Making it mandatory to wear nose and mouth coverings isn't a fix all, but it will significantly reduce the risk of catching the virus for millions of people and will also help our economy and our health service.'

'As more and more shops and social areas open, the more people will naturally want to visit them. By wearing a face covering, they reduce the risk to others and reduce the spread of a virus that has already claimed more than 40,000 lives.'

Legislative change would bring England broadly in line with Scotland, Ireland and around 120 countries that have already mandated facial coverings to mitigate the potential detrimental effects of easing lockdown.

The BMA believes people should have to wear masks until such time that the risk of COVID-19 poses minimal threat to the health of the population and economic stability of this country.

Thirty four BMA council members voted in favour of the mandatory wearing of face masks in shops in England today while three voted against. BMA council will reconvene tomorrow.



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