



**Health  
Information  
and Quality  
Authority**

An tÚdarás Um Fhaisnéis  
agus Cáilíocht Sláinte

## **Protocol**

# **Face masks and physical distancing to limit the spread of SARS-CoV-2: an international review**

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## **1 Purpose and aim**

The purpose of this protocol is to outline the process by which the Health Information and Quality Authority's (HIQA's) Health Technology Assessment (HTA) Team will conduct a review of guidance on face mask use and physical distancing currently in place internationally to limit the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). For the purposes of this document, the term 'mask' is interpreted as a respirator, disposable medical/surgical type mask, or as a reusable fabric or cloth face covering. Unless otherwise stated, this review does not consider face shields or face visors.

The information contained in the review will inform the work of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2 Process outline**

Three distinct steps in the process have been identified. These are listed below and described in more detail in sections 2.1–2.4:

1. search relevant international resources
2. review and extract relevant information on the current status of two public health measures - face mask usage and physical distancing, that have been employed internationally to limit the spread of COVID-19
3. extract epidemiological information that describes the current situation in each country
4. summarise the information and circulate to NPHE.

### **2.1 Search of relevant international resources**

The review will focus on the national response to COVID-19 in 19 countries and three international agencies, which have been identified by NPHE. The list of countries predominantly comprises European countries (including UK and EU/EEA countries), due to the working constraints of the HTA team. The list of countries and associated governmental resources that will be searched is detailed in Appendix A.

Information on face mask and physical distancing guidance that is currently in place to limit the spread of SARS-CoV-2 will be sought from reliable government resources only. Examples of national authority websites which will be consulted are listed in Appendix A. Where information on these public health measures cannot be extracted due to language barriers, or a lack of information, or lack of public policy response to the virus, this will be documented.

## **2.2 Review and extract relevant information on public health measures and strategies**

The review will extract relevant information on the use of two public health measures in each of the countries listed:

1. face masks
2. physical distancing.

In particular, where possible, it will be documented whether the guidance is mandatory or advisory and whether there are specific exemptions in place. The following exemptions will be considered for each measure:

- exemptions on the basis of age
- exemptions on the basis of vaccination/immunity status.

Face mask usage and physical distancing guidance for the following areas will be examined where this information is available: general public (indoors and outdoors), education and childcare facilities, workplaces, hospitality (bar and restaurants), retail, sporting activities (indoors and outdoors) and public transport.

## **2.3 Extract key epidemiological data that describe the current situation in each country**

A range of key epidemiological data will be extracted as part of the review. The epidemiological parameters of interest include:

- 14-day notification rate of newly reported COVID-19 cases per 100,000 population
- 14-day notification rate of newly reported COVID-19 deaths per million population
- daily hospital occupancy rate (number of COVID-19 patients in hospital on a given day per million population)
- daily intensive care unit (ICU) occupancy rate (number of COVID-19 patients in ICU on a given day per million population)
- total number of vaccination doses (counted as a single dose) administered per 100 people
- share of the population that have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

The epidemiological data will be sourced from [Our World in Data](#), which is produced by the Oxford Martin School at the University of Oxford and the Global Change Data Lab (A UK-based charity in the education sector).

## **2.4 Summarise the information**

The public health guidance around face masks and physical distancing that are currently in place to limit the spread of SARS-CoV-2, in the included countries, will be documented to capture recent changes with context and, where available, stated rationale for changes.

## **3 Review and update**

Given the rapidly changing environment, this protocol will be regarded as a live document and amended when required to ensure it reflects any changes made to the outlined processes.

## Appendix 1- List of countries and associated resources

### EU/EEA countries

- Austria
  - <https://www.sozialministerium.at/en.html>
  - <https://metropole.at/coronavirus-updates-in-english/>
- Belgium
  - <https://www.info-coronavirus.be/en/faq/>
  - <https://www.info-coronavirus.be/en/covid/>
  - <https://www.info-coronavirus.be/en/>
- Czech Republic
  - <https://www.vlada.cz/en/media-centrum/aktualne/measures-adopted-by-the-czech-government-against-coronavirus-180545/>
- Denmark
  - <https://coronasmitte.dk/en>
  - <https://coronasmitte.dk/en/rules-and-regulations>
  - <https://coronasmitte.dk/en/overview>
- Finland
  - <https://stm.fi/en/frontpage>
  - <https://thl.fi/en/web/thlfi-en>
- France
  - <https://www.gouvernement.fr/info-coronavirus>
- Germany
  - <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en>
- Ireland
  - <https://www.gov.ie/en/>
  - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e5175-resilience-and-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>
  - <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>
- Italy
  - <http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/dettaglioFaqNuovoCoronavirus.jsp?lingua=english&id=230#11>
- Netherlands
  - <https://www.government.nl/topics/coronavirus-covid-19>
- Norway
  - <https://stm.fi/en/frontpage>

- o <https://www.fhi.no/sv/smittsomme-sykdommer/corona/>
- Portugal
  - o <https://covid19estamoson.gov.pt/>
  - o <https://www.visitportugal.com/en/node/421175>
- Spain
  - o <https://english.elpais.com/news/society/>
  - o <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/Paginas/index.aspx>
  - o <http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Portal/es/Paginas/inicio.aspx>
- Sweden
  - o <https://www.government.se/government-policy/the-governments-work-in-response-to-the-virus-responsible-for-covid-19/>
  - o <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/smittskydd-beredskap/utbrott/aktuella-utbrott/covid-19/>
  - o <https://www.krisinformation.se/>

### **Non-EU/EEA countries**

- England
  - o <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>
  - o <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/new-national-restrictions-from-5-november>
  - o <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do>
- Northern Ireland
  - o <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19>
  - o <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>
- Scotland
  - o <https://www.gov.scot/>
  - o <https://www.gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19/>
  - o <https://www.gov.scot/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance/>
- Wales
  - o <https://gov.wales/coronavirus>
  - o <https://gov.wales/coronavirus-firebreak-frequently-asked-questions>
- Israel
  - o <https://www.gov.il/en/Departments/Guides/ramzor-cites-guidelines?chapterIndex=1>

### **Health Agencies**

- ECDC

- o <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/news-events/ecdc-guidance-adjusting-non-pharmaceutical-interventions-based-vaccination-status>
- WHO
  - o <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-masks>
- CDC
  - o <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html>

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