



Príomhoifigeach Cliniciúil
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BY EMAIL ONLY

Deputy Paul Murphy
Dáil Éireann
Leinster House
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26th July 2023

PQ33606/23- Deputy Paul Murphy- To ask the Minister for Health to outline the reason behind the decision to remove mandatory masks in lexical settings; and the evidence used to make this decision.

Dear Deputy Murphy,

Thank you for your representation.

Please note that it is assumed that your query relates to medical settings (not lexical) and the response is framed in that context.

ECDC updated its IPC guidance in early February 2023 - <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Considerations%20for%20IPC%20respiratory%20viral%20infections%20in%20HC%20settings.pdf>. This updated included advice to consider universal masking (staff, patients all areas) or targeted (all staff for all patient contact) during periods of high community transmission of viruses, and, of note, to step this down outside of these periods.

This was given due consideration by the HSE AMRIC team.

Use of masks is one component of a layered IPC approach and their use alone is not an effective barrier to transmission. The widespread use of masks in healthcare settings was of concern, as it undermined their appropriate use as personal protective equipment, worn as they are within and outside of clinical areas and for long periods in various incorrect and ineffectual manners.

At the introduction of any IPC control measure, it is usual to consider when that measure might be stepped down, and it would be usual to keep this under review while the control measure is in place.

The response to COVID-19 in Ireland and internationally continued to be updated as we moved through different phases of the pandemic. Our national public health advice had changed, so that, at that time (March 2023), widespread testing for COVID-19, as well as the requirement for use of masks in many indoor spaces by the general public had also ended. Other measures,



such as the HSE continuing to offer COVID-19 vaccination to a large number of people, and recommendations to avoid interactions with others if symptomatic, remain in place.

Where there isn't a high level of COVID-19 in the community, it is also appropriate to move away from universal use of masks for health and care workers, and for patients and visitors in a health and care setting. It was noted that community circulation of viruses was trending downwards, and any purported benefits of universal mask usage was likely to be offset by risks with inappropriate use. The costs of supply of masks, stock management, waste and likely environmental cost was also considered. In light of this clinical experience and considering our highly immune population, (a hybrid of vaccination and infection), and the general fall in numbers of outbreaks of respiratory viruses, AMRIC recommended to revert to a more standard approach to IPC and PPE usage, recommending the use of masks as PPE only as part of transmission based precautions. The option of their use could also be determined based on local IPC risk assessment. This approach was in line with the ECDC updated guidance referenced above (6 Feb 2023).

Verbal feedback was taken from various IPC team members at AMRIC forums and other stakeholders. There was broad support for this approach from across IPC colleagues. Some acute settings had already removed the requirement for mask use in non-clinical areas within their sites, a measure which has been well received by healthcare colleagues.

This approach was agreed and updated AMRIC guidance was published on 06/04/2023 for implementation from 19/04/2023. AMRIC education webinars were delivered in April to support staff with implementation of this updated AMRIC guidance.

In keeping with former NPHET advice, the Government also moved forward with return towards normal social and economic life across all sectors.

New HSE guidance on Mask wearing published on 06/04/2023 that came into effect from 19/04/2023 stated:

Health and care workers

- Universal use of face masks in hospitals and other health and care settings will end from April 19.
- Health and care workers should wear a surgical mask or respirator mask in settings where patients have suspected or confirmed COVID-19/respiratory illness, or infection prevention and control team advise of a high risk that patients with unsuspected COVID-19/respiratory illness are likely to be present
- Local risk assessments will help in deciding when to stop using face masks in each setting. Health and care workers in low risk settings should use standard precautions, and assess if wearing a surgical mask or other PPE is required.
- Care staff living and working with residents in health and social care settings should use standard precautions when caring for those who are not suspected of having COVID-19/respiratory illness, and decide if a face mask should be worn.
- In settings where face masks are not deemed necessary, staff will not be required to wear them, but may choose to do so. Surgical and respirator masks should continue to



be available to healthcare workers in all settings.

For healthcare workers in non-clinical settings where services users are not present; a face mask is not required, although staff may choose to use one.

Public, visitors and people attending health and care facilities

- Face masks are generally not required in most health and care services, for people who do not have respiratory symptoms.
- You are welcome to wear a mask if you wish. Face masks will be available at health and care facilities.
- On occasion, you may be asked to wear a mask by a member of staff, this is to protect yourself and others.
- Please wear a mask if you have been asked to and follow the advice of our staff.
- Health and care workers will wear a face mask when it is needed.

People who are clinically vulnerable

- You are welcome to wear a face mask in any health and care setting. Face masks will be available at health and care facilities.
- On occasion, you may be asked to wear a mask by a member of staff, this is to protect yourself and others.
- Health and care workers will wear a face mask when it is needed.

I hope this provides you with some assistance.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sharon Hayden', written in a cursive style.

Sharon Hayden
General Manager
Office of the Chief Clinical Officer