

Face masks becoming normal, but still a flashpoint and source of conspiracies

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A new UK study by King's College London and Ipsos MORI finds that while people are getting used to wearing face masks, they have been a source of tension for some, and notable minorities believe conspiracy theories about them.

The study also finds that precautionary "COVID-secure" behaviours are sticking, with reported compliance largely unchanged from May.

The study is based on 2,237 interviews with UK residents aged 16-75, and was carried out online between 17 and 20 July 2020. This was before the wearing of face [masks](#) became mandatory in shops in England, but after the measure was announced by the government.

Face mask wearing

- There has been a marked increase in [face mask](#) wearing, with 70% now saying they have worn one in the last few weeks, up from 19% in April.
- There is also widespread belief that wearing face masks helps stop COVID-19 from spreading, with 81% agreeing and only 9% disagreeing.

Face mask conspiracies

- One in 10 people (10%) think wearing a face mask is bad for your health, which increases to 16% of 16-24-year-olds and 19%

of those who think COVID-19 is a low risk to the UK.

- Around a quarter of those who say they get a great deal or fair amount of their information on COVID-19 from WhatsApp (27%) and YouTube (23%) say wearing a mask is bad for your health.
- One in eight people (13%) think the government only wants us to wear face masks as a way of controlling us, which increases to one in five 16-24-year-olds (21%) and a quarter among BAME groups (25%).
- Again, there are even larger differences for those who draw on social media for information about the virus: a third (34%) of those use WhatsApp as a main source of information agree, as do 3 in 10 (30%) who rely on YouTube.

Face masks as a flashpoint

- Confronting or reporting someone
- One in 12 people (8%) have confronted others for not wearing a mask.
- This increases to one in five people who think they've had coronavirus (20%), and a quarter of those who get a great deal or fair amount of their information from WhatsApp (24%). This will partly reflect the younger age profile of these groups, and their greater likelihood of leaving the home more regularly.
- One in 20 (5%) have reported someone to the authorities for not wearing a mask.
- This triples to 16% among those who think they've had coronavirus, and is four times higher among those who get their information on coronavirus from WhatsApp (20%).

Being confronted or reported

- More than one in 20 people (6%) say they've been confronted by someone for not wearing a mask.
- This again increases to around one in five of those who've had or think they've had coronavirus (21%), and a quarter of those who get their information from WhatsApp (25%) or YouTube (24%).
- One in 20 people (5%) have been reported to the authorities for not wearing a face mask, which increases to 16% of those who think they've had coronavirus, 18% of those who get their information from YouTube and 20% of those who get their information from WhatsApp.

Overall, 13% of the population have either confronted or reported people about not wearing face masks, or been reported or confronted themselves.

But this varies hugely across the population, with the following groups much more likely to have been involved in confrontations or reports to the authorities:

- Those who rely on WhatsApp (40%) or YouTube (37%) as a source of COVID-19 information.
- People who think they've had the virus (33%).
- 16-24-year-olds (31%).

Living with face masks long-term

- If a vaccine or treatment does not become available, 77% consider it acceptable that people will be required to wear face masks outside their home over the very long term—up from 67% in May.
- However, half (47%) also say it would be acceptable for people to choose whether to wear face masks—although this is down significantly from 67% in May.

- Views are fairly consistent across groups, though only 58% of those who think coronavirus is a low risk in the UK think it is acceptable to require people to wear them in the very long term.

Relaxing lockdown

- 48% of parents now say they will feel comfortable about sending their children back to school, up from 33% in the third week of May.
- There has been a slight decline, from 54% to 50%, in the proportion thinking the UK government is relaxing the measures too quickly.
- On a trade-off between fighting coronavirus and maintaining personal freedoms, the majority of the population (62%) give more emphasis to fighting coronavirus, while 18% are more focused on protecting civil liberties.

Aside from on children's schooling, there has been only a limited change in views since the third week of May, with people still most likely to prioritise health over the economy and other impacts, but slightly less worried about relaxing the rules.

This stable picture may reflect largely unchanged financial experiences across the population since May.

"COVID-secure" precautionary behaviours

- Despite the easing of the restrictions, a quarter of people (26%) still say they haven't left their home for five or more of the last seven days—though this is down from 41% in May.
- 11% of parents now say their child has not left home at all in the past week, compared with 23% in May. Still, 30% of children are

reportedly not leaving home on five or more days a week, down from 47% in May.

- Claimed levels of behaviours such as hand-washing, covering your mouth when you cough and staying 2 metres away from people have hardly changed, remaining at around 90%.
- And the proportions of those who say they are going further, by washing their clothes when they return home (40%) or washing or disinfecting items they bring into their home (52%), are virtually unchanged since May.

Finally, while the threat from COVID-19 has reduced and lockdown has been relaxed somewhat, there has been little change in the proportions who say they have been suffering in the past month:

- 46% say they have been more anxious and depressed, compared with 48% in May.
- 39% say they have felt more lonely, compared with 43% in May.

And a quarter (26%) still say they have drunk more alcohol than they normally would, down slightly from 29% in May.

Professor Bobby Duffy, Director of the Policy Institute at King's College London, said:

"The large majority of the public have now come round to the idea of wearing face masks—a rapid change in both behaviour and belief, given how recently ago they seemed like an extreme measure and there was such uncertainty over their effectiveness in advice from government and elsewhere.

"But face masks are also proving a source of tension for a significant minority. One in eight survey respondents say they've been involved in either confrontations or reports to the authorities about not wearing

them—and while this is a minority of the UK population, it is equivalent to around 6 million people. This is also much higher among some groups, particularly the young and those who rely on social media for information on COVID-19, partly reflecting these groups' much higher levels of belief in conspiracy theories about face masks.

"More generally, though, 'COVID-secure' behaviours are becoming embedded for many of us, and while the public say they're still being cautious, there are some signs that people are feeling more at ease about a loosening of the restrictions, with parents in particular now much more likely to say they're comfortable with their children returning to school."

Kelly Beaver, managing director of public affairs at Ipsos MORI, said:

"What once were considered extraordinary measures to help combat the COVID-19 pandemic, now seem to have percolated into our day-to-day lives and are increasingly routine. Actions like hand washing now remain consistent at the high levels reached early in the pandemic. People continue to believe that there are difficult choices to face for government but that ultimately it should continue to prioritise people's health over the economic risks."

Dr. Louise Smith, senior research associate in the Health Protection Research Unit in Emergency Preparedness and Response at King's College London, said:

"Most people we surveyed reported having worn a mask or face covering in the last two weeks, even before they were made compulsory in shops. While they were not mandatory at the time, a significant minority said they had experienced confrontation for not having worn one. With the introduction of government measures on face coverings, and lack of clarity on policing, there is the potential that those not wearing a face covering, in some cases for medical reasons, may be the recipients of

criticism and confrontation.

"There are also worrying levels of endorsement of misinformation and conspiracy theories about wearing face masks. Directing people to correct scientific information about face coverings on [social media](#) platforms such as YouTube and WhatsApp may help reduce confrontations about wearing them.

"With more people venturing out, and with the opening of restaurants, bars, hairdressers, sports facilities among others, it is especially important that people keep practicing good protective behaviours such as maintaining distance from others while out and about, washing your hands thoroughly and regularly, and wearing a face covering where necessary."

Technical details

Ipsos MORI interviewed a sample of 2,237 adults aged 16-75 in the United Kingdom using its online i:omnibus between 17 and 20 July 2020. Data has been weighted to the known offline population proportions for age within gender, government office region, working status, social grade and education. All surveys are subject to a range of potential sources of error.

Provided by King's College London

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