Covid-19: Hospitals and GP clinics return to universal mask wearing as rates rise

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Hospitals and general practices around the country are once more insisting on mask wearing by staff and patients in response to high rates of covid.

Responsibility for infection control decisions over and above national guidance is now a "matter for local discretion," NHS England confirmed in updated advice in June that underlined the importance of local risk assessments.

Now, just weeks after the rules on wearing masks in healthcare settings were relaxed, many hospitals and individual practices have announced that they are reinstating them.

In Sussex all NHS organisations have reintroduced masks. An announcement from Sussex Integrated Care System said it acted after data showed a 33.3% rise in numbers of people testing positive for SARS-CoV-2 in England.

The NHS England Midlands regional team also sent out a letter to all providers asking them to review their guidance with a view to moving back to universal mask wearing for all staff, including primary care settings, as well as encouraging it for patients and visitors. "It is apparent that we have entered the next covid-19 wave," the letter said. "Across the last seven days we have had a 97% increase in our nosocomial covid-19 cases in acute trust settings and a 25% increase in our mental health settings; this has also included a rise in the numbers of patients who have been admitted into critical care beds."

NHS England Midlands also said there had been an increase in "covid-19 related staff absence."

Other trusts that have recently announced a return to mandatory mask use in all areas include Oxford, Southampton, Sheffield, Cornwall, North Tees and Hartlepool, Gloucestershire, Nottingham, Lewisham and Greenwich, Nottinghamshire, and Lancashire.

Saffron Cordery, interim chief executive of NHS Providers, which represents trusts, said reviewing guidance on infection prevention and mask wearing made sense, given the rising covid-19 rates.

"We have consistently called for individual trusts to be able to make their own decisions on mask wearing and other measures to minimise the spread of covid based on their particular circumstances, such as local covid-19 infection rates and the make-up of their estates," she said. "One size fits all was never the right approach."

Cordery added that though some trusts recently reintroduced mask requirements because of the rise in infection rates, others had never moved away from this approach.

Bromley by Bow Health, a large general practice across three sites in east London, has reintroduced a mask policy. GP partner Selvaseelan Selvarajah said that many of his colleagues were currently unwell with covid. He said, "Given the rapidly rising covid cases among the patients and staff in GP practices, we have decided to go back to mandatory face masks within our premises.

"The current situation is causing increased sickness among staff, leading to our service provision for patients being significantly challenged, and at times we are having to run urgent care only service."

In Wales it is also a matter for individual NHS organisations. But Eluned Morgan, minister for health and social services, said there had been an increase in people admitted to hospital with covid, as well as staff off work, and while not making face coverings mandatory in healthcare settings she said she would encourage everyone to wear one.