

Guidance on Social Distancing if you are Blind or Partially Sighted

As our society emerges from the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, we are all learning and adapting to new measures that will help us to resume our everyday activities, such as shopping, commuting, employment, travel and recreation. These activities require social distancing and the reorganisation of some public spaces. They affect every area of life, from our homes to streets and town centres, public transport, the workplace, and leisure spaces.

Blind and partially sighted people have told us that they find social distancing difficult to maintain and would welcome clear guidance to assist them when getting out and about. As the lockdown restrictions ease, this guidance is designed to assist blind and partially sighted people to safely resume their everyday activities, within existing government and public health advice.

As Government information is subject to change, please keep up to date with current COVID-19 advice on the NI Direct website through the following link:
<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/coronavirus-regulations-guidance>

When going about your everyday activities, it is recommended:

1. If you have a cane, please use it. If you are using a long cane, ensure your arc is wide enough to extend just beyond your shoulder width, to help ensure a safer social distance. Keep to the middle of the path and let others step into the road if they need to. If you need advice on how to use a cane or need a replacement, please call your nearest Sensory Support Team (contact details below).
2. To disinfect your cane handle and the tip when you return home, and then wash your hands thoroughly.
3. That you consider carrying a form of identification that you are comfortable with, e.g. symbol cane, an identification card or a badge. If you are interested in obtaining a lanyard, please call the RNIB Helpline for further information (contact details below).
4. Tell people you have a visual impairment, and don't hesitate to ask for assistance. Families, friends and the public need to know what works for you.
5. If you think someone is too close, tell them you have a visual impairment and ask them whether they are at the correct distance. Should you feel the need to step back and can do so safely, you will be protecting each other by keeping this distance.
6. In wet weather, poor visibility, or when it is dark: wear a high visibility reflective jacket, or belt, so that other people can see you and give you space.
7. Should you require guiding, you could choose a friend, family member, carer, or other identified support.

8. If you are being guided, or are guiding a blind or partially sighted person, current public health advice remains applicable, namely, to limit the amount of time spent at less than 2 metres apart. Wear a face covering and if possible, a fresh pair of single use disposable gloves, but always ensure that you maintain good hand hygiene and sanitation practices.
9. To wash or sanitise your hands frequently. Carry hand sanitiser gel with you at all times: lots of shops expect you to use their sanitiser on entry but it might be difficult to find.
10. That you carry a spare face covering and disposable gloves to cover any circumstance/situation where they might be required, e.g. where you may need assistance when out and about.
11. You consider using complimentary precautions such as the changing of clothes after being in close, or direct contact of less than one metre proximity to someone, and the sanitising of any additional aids with an antibacterial wipe, e.g. a Ramble Tag, for guiding purposes.
12. If travelling by car, the driver may wish to clean down surfaces before and after a journey and ensure good ventilation for the duration of the drive, particularly if the passenger is clinically vulnerable.
13. Where possible, journeys should be planned to avoid crowded areas and peak times on public transport. If planning to use public transport, the use of face coverings is now mandatory.
14. To follow current government guidance on the use of face coverings. Please visit the NI Direct website: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-face-coverings>

You must use face coverings when you are on public transport, in shops, and/or in enclosed spaces, unless you are exempt. Wearing a face covering is particularly important if you think you might need help from another person, that brings you into close contact.

15. That if you have a physical or mental illness or impairment, or a disability that means you cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering, it is considered a reasonable exemption.
16. By Government, that avoiding the risk of harm or injury to yourself or others, is a reasonable excuse not to wear a face covering. The exemption could apply to people who have "a restricted field of vision, particularly if any residual vision is at the lower edge of the normal field of view". A visual impairment is not a blanket exemption from wearing a face covering.
17. If you have problems with a face covering constantly impeding your useful vision, you should experiment safely at home with different types to see whether one can be made to work, before using an exemption. A cloth face covering, or one purchased with an enclosed wire that you can mould to the shape of your nose, is less likely to impede your useful vision.

18. If you find that a face covering impedes your useful vision when carrying out specific tasks – for example, when boarding a bus or train – it would be reasonable to adjust or remove it for the duration of the task and then refit it as soon as is practical, remembering to sanitise your hands afterwards.
19. If you are having problems with condensation, you should try different ways of fitting the covering – for example, using one with an enclosed wire that you can mould to the shape of your nose, or by fitting the face covering before putting on your glasses. Condensation alone would not be a reason for declaring an exemption.
20. If you have difficulty hearing and need to ask someone to move or remove their face covering to see their mouth to lip read while you are talking to them, this is mentioned by the government as an acceptable use of an exemption. If you wear a behind-the-ear hearing aid, be careful not to catch it when removing your own face covering.
21. If you find you cannot wear your hearing aids or cochlear implant processor securely with a face covering, or if wearing a face covering interferes with your hearing aids or cochlear implant processor, this counts as a legitimate reason for not wearing one.
22. If either you or the person guiding you develop symptoms or test positive for COVID-19, you would be deemed to be close contacts, and should both get tested and self-isolate. If either the person being guided or the guider develop COVID-19 symptoms, then stay at home: guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) infection must be followed. If you are able to, both parties should follow Coronavirus (COVID-19) testing procedures.

No guiding will be possible for up to 14 days, while self-isolating, or until tests for both parties prove negative.

Please see the following link: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-testing-and-contact-tracing>

REMEMBER: social distancing is about keeping everybody safe. Of course, there will always be situations where people forget that we share this collective responsibility. Use this guidance to do your best to keep safe and remember that you are not on your own.

Please note that Government guidance is subject to change. Always ensure that you keep up to date with the latest developments.

For more information visit the NI Direct website at the following link:
<http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/coronavirus-regulations-guidance>

Contacting your Sensory Support Team

If you need some help to build up your skills and self-confidence, please contact your local Sensory Support Team. We are here to assist, just give us a call:

Belfast Health & Social Care Trust	028 9504 0200
Northern Health & Social Care Trust	028 2586 3800
South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust	028 9260 7746
Southern Health & Social Care Trust	028 3756 4444
Western Health & Social Care Trust	028 6632 4400

Sources of Help and Support

RNIB Helpline (Freephone: 0303 123 9999) has extended its opening hours. It is now open on weekdays (from 8am-8pm) and on Saturdays (from 9am-5pm). In addition to the usual help and advice on living with sight loss, our advisers can connect you to local support, and assist you in signing up to telephone and online groups that may offer a source of comfort in these times. Through the same number, you can also access pre-recorded information on the coronavirus and the Government's response.

Guide Dogs Covid-19 Information Line (Freephone: 0800 781 1444) is open on weekdays (from 9am-5pm). It supplies answers and information, for adults and families of children with sight loss, about living actively, independently and keeping well during the coronavirus outbreak. Whether you're asking for yourself, a member of your family, or your child, we can offer online support and telephone services, and can help you access services from other organisations.

This information has been developed in partnership between RNIB Northern Ireland, Guide Dogs NI and Health and Social Care. These guidelines have been informed by the following:

Guide Dogs, "Covid-19 Recovery Guidance and Documentation: Working with a Client or Volunteer Person to Person".

Guide Dogs, "Information and guidance for people with vision impairment on the use of face coverings in England".

RNIB, "Sighted Guiding and Support Bubble Guidance".

RNIB, "Use of Face Coverings (England only)".

Action on Hearing Loss, "Face Coverings: How the regulations apply to you".

The National Council for the Blind of Ireland (<https://www.ncbi.ie/>)

The Canadian National Institute for the Blind (<https://cnib.ca/en/sight-loss-info/covid-19-resources/physical-distancing?region=gta>)

Henshaws

(<https://www.henshaws.org.uk/top-tips-for-social-distancing-if-you-are-blind-or-visually-impaired/>)

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