# UK health authorities urge mask-wearing as respiratory illnesses surge this winter



As the autumn-winter season unfolds, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) has issued a "mask alert," urging the public to consider wearing face coverings amid a rise in respiratory illnesses. The agency highlighted four key viruses currently circulating widely: influenza, COVID-19, the common cold, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). These infections typically see an uptick during the colder months, prompting renewed public health advice aimed at curbing their spread.

In its public communications, including a recent post on the social media platform X, UKHSA emphasised practical steps for individuals and families feeling unwell. The guidance includes staying at home whenever possible, frequent hand washing, covering coughs and sneezes with tissues, ensuring adequate ventilation indoors, and considering face masks when going out. These measures are designed to reduce transmission and protect vulnerable groups.

This advice echoes calls from international health experts. Swiss epidemiologist Tanja Stadler, chair of the Swiss Confederation's COVID scientific task force, recently told SonntagsZeitung that wearing masks in crowded, enclosed spaces such as public transport is advisable, especially for those over 65 or with weakened immune systems. Marcel Tanner, a public health professor emeritus in Basel, endorsed mask-wearing for anyone with a cold to prevent spreading infections in public spaces.

Furthermore, UKHSA is strongly encouraging vaccination against the flu, COVID-19, and RSV ahead of winter. Surveillance data indicates a gradual rise in COVID-19 positivity rates, underscoring the importance of immunisation for eligible groups, including pregnant women and children. The "Stay Strong. Get Vaccinated" campaign aims to boost vaccine uptake through multiple media channels, reinforcing vaccination as a cornerstone of respiratory illness prevention.

The World Health Organization (WHO) supports similar messages, highlighting the "triple threat" of co-circulating COVID-19, influenza, and RSV viruses during the colder months. WHO campaigns call on individuals and communities to protect vulnerable populations by practising good hygiene, staying home when unwell, ensuring good ventilation, and wearing masks in crowded or poorly ventilated spaces.

Public health bodies like the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provide further resources to help both the public and healthcare providers prepare for and mitigate respiratory virus risks. These include educational toolkits emphasising vaccination and everyday prevention behaviours as the most effective protection against severe respiratory illness.

Recent UK surveillance reports show a mixed picture: while COVID-19 activity has declined in many measures to baseline levels, influenza remains at high levels, and RSV is circulating at lower levels. This dynamic situation requires continued vigilance and adherence to recommended preventive measures, including mask-wearing, to reduce transmission risk as winter progresses.

Reinforcing these points, UKHSA recently revisited its guidance on winter respiratory infections, underlining that fundamental behaviours such as mask use, hygiene, isolation when sick, and vaccination remain critical even as new COVID variants like BA.2.86 emerge.

In summary, as four major respiratory illnesses sweep through the UK this winter, health authorities both domestic and international urge comprehensive protective practices centred around vaccination, mask-wearing, hygiene, and staying home when ill. These measures collectively aim to protect public health, reduce hospital pressure, and safeguard those most vulnerable in the community.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/health/ukhsa-issues-mask-alert-four-32721106) Birmingham Mail, [[6]](https://ukhsa.blog.gov.uk/2023/09/19/get-winter-strong-revisiting-respiratory-infection-guidance-for-a-safer-season/) UKHSA Blog
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/health/ukhsa-issues-mask-alert-four-32721106) Birmingham Mail, [[3]](https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/events/item/2024/10/09/default-calendar/preventing-a-triple-threat-this-autumn-and-winter--applying-lessons-and-understanding-individual-risk-to-protect-ourselves-and-others-from-respiratory-illness) WHO Europe
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/health/ukhsa-issues-mask-alert-four-32721106) Birmingham Mail
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ukhsa-urges-vaccination-against-respiratory-viruses-ahead-of-winter) UK Government
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/events/item/2024/10/09/default-calendar/preventing-a-triple-threat-this-autumn-and-winter--applying-lessons-and-understanding-individual-risk-to-protect-ourselves-and-others-from-respiratory-illness) WHO Europe, [[7]](https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/events/item/2023/09/29/default-calendar/keeping-safe-from-covid-19--influenza--and-respiratory-syncytial-virus-%28rsv%29-this-autumn-and-winter.-protecting-lives.-strengthening-health-systems) WHO Europe
* Paragraph 6 – [[4]](https://www.cdc.gov/respiratory-viruses/php/toolkit/index.html) CDC
* Paragraph 7 – [[5]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/flu-and-covid-19-surveillance-report-published) UKHSA Surveillance Report
* Paragraph 8 – [[6]](https://ukhsa.blog.gov.uk/2023/09/19/get-winter-strong-revisiting-respiratory-infection-guidance-for-a-safer-season/) UKHSA Blog
* Paragraph 9 – [[1]](https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/health/ukhsa-issues-mask-alert-four-32721106) Birmingham Mail, [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ukhsa-urges-vaccination-against-respiratory-viruses-ahead-of-winter) UK Government, [[3]](https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/events/item/2024/10/09/default-calendar/preventing-a-triple-threat-this-autumn-and-winter--applying-lessons-and-understanding-individual-risk-to-protect-ourselves-and-others-from-respiratory-illness) WHO Europe

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/health/ukhsa-issues-mask-alert-four-32721106> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ukhsa-urges-vaccination-against-respiratory-viruses-ahead-of-winter> - The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) is urging individuals to get vaccinated against flu, COVID-19, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) ahead of the winter months. Surveillance data indicates a steady increase in cases, with COVID-19 positivity rising from 7.6% to 8.4% in a week. Vaccination is recommended for eligible groups, including pregnant women and children, with appointments available from 1 October. The 'Stay Strong. Get Vaccinated' campaign aims to boost uptake through various media channels.
3. <https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/events/item/2024/10/09/default-calendar/preventing-a-triple-threat-this-autumn-and-winter--applying-lessons-and-understanding-individual-risk-to-protect-ourselves-and-others-from-respiratory-illness> - The World Health Organization (WHO) calls on individuals, communities, and governments to protect vulnerable populations during autumn and winter. Since the onset of COVID-19, there has been a triple threat of co-circulating viruses: COVID-19, influenza, and respiratory syncytial virus. The campaign emphasizes the importance of vaccination and individual measures to reduce infection risk, including staying home when unwell, regular handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes, ensuring good ventilation, and wearing masks in crowded or poorly ventilated spaces.
4. <https://www.cdc.gov/respiratory-viruses/php/toolkit/index.html> - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides a toolkit to assist public health partners in preparing and protecting communities from respiratory illnesses like influenza, COVID-19, and RSV. The toolkit includes resources such as sample social media messages, graphics, videos, and handouts to educate the public and healthcare providers. It emphasizes vaccination as the most effective tool for preventing severe respiratory illnesses and recommends everyday prevention strategies to reduce risk.
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/flu-and-covid-19-surveillance-report-published> - The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) publishes weekly surveillance reports on flu and COVID-19 activity. The report for week 52 indicates that COVID-19 activity decreased across most indicators and was at baseline levels, while influenza activity increased across most indicators and was at high levels. Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) activity decreased across most indicators and was circulating at low levels. The report provides insights into the prevalence and trends of these respiratory illnesses.
6. <https://ukhsa.blog.gov.uk/2023/09/19/get-winter-strong-revisiting-respiratory-infection-guidance-for-a-safer-season/> - As the winter season approaches, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) revisits guidance on face coverings, isolation, vaccination, and other behaviours to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory infections. The guidance includes staying home when unwell, practising good hygiene, ensuring good ventilation, and considering wearing a face covering. The article also addresses the emergence of COVID-19 variant BA.2.86 and reassures the public that current advice remains unchanged.
7. <https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/events/item/2023/09/29/default-calendar/keeping-safe-from-covid-19--influenza--and-respiratory-syncytial-virus-%28rsv%29-this-autumn-and-winter.-protecting-lives.-strengthening-health-systems> - The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe launches a campaign to highlight the importance of staying up to date with COVID-19 and influenza vaccinations during autumn and winter. The campaign also emphasizes individual measures to reduce the risk of infection from respiratory viruses, including staying home when unwell, regular handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes, ensuring good ventilation, and wearing masks in crowded or poorly ventilated spaces. The aim is to protect vulnerable populations and strengthen health systems.