

Mandatory masks on public transportation

Key details

- Starting July 24, it will be mandatory for drivers and passengers to wear a non-medical mask on public transportation.
- Public transportation includes:
 - public transit buses and ferries
 - school buses
 - community transit vehicles
 - private taxis and shuttles
- Children under two and people with a medical reason for not wearing a mask are exempt.
- Passengers are asked to use their own masks as much as possible. Government will help transportation services with supplies of masks for people who can't bring their own.
- This is a first step toward ensuring Nova Scotians wear masks in places where it is difficult to maintain physical distance from others.

Q&As

Why are you doing this now? Why not at the beginning of the pandemic?

The evidence on non-medical masks has evolved through the pandemic, and our public health direction has evolved along with it. We have learned that they are effective in helping prevent the spread of COVID-19. Before a second wave of arrives, we need to make mask wearing a habit for Nova Scotians.

Why are non-medical masks so important?

Non-medical masks help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Our response to this pandemic has highlighted that, in many ways, we need to think about others and put them first. Wearing a non-medical mask shows that you care about others and you are asking them to do the same for you. We need to continue caring, community, and common sense.

Why only make masks mandatory on public transportation? Why not all indoor public settings? Are you considering making it mandatory in more places?

We are continuing to look at the epidemiology and different settings. This is a first step toward ensuring Nova Scotians wear masks in places where it is difficult to maintain physical distance from others. We are starting with public transportation because it's essential for many people, it's a closed environment, and we've had some cases that were transmitted in this setting.

What's your definition of public transportation?

Our definition of public transportation is:

- municipal transit buses and ferries
- school buses
- community transit vehicles
- private taxis and shuttles

For the purposes of this requirement, public transportation does not include:

- private buses or other vehicles for transporting employees
- provincial ferries, such as the ones at Englishtown and LaHave
- ferries between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, PEI, and Newfoundland

We are looking at tour buses and motor coaches. We are talking with these businesses about appropriate safety measures for these environments.

What are medical reasons for not wearing a mask?

There are very few valid medical reasons to not wear a mask. The Canadian Thoracic Society states that there is no evidence that wearing a mask worsens a chronic lung condition such as asthma or COPD.

For some people with chronic breathing conditions or mental health conditions, wearing a mask can create anxiety. However, there are ways to overcome anxiety such as practicing wearing a mask for short periods of time at home.

There are also some people with cognitive or developmental disabilities who are unable to wear a mask.

Some people say wearing a mask can make you sick, like inhaling too much carbon dioxide or not getting enough oxygen. Is there any truth to that?

That is absolutely false. Other than children under two and people with a valid medical reason for not wearing a mask, there is no health hazard associated with wearing one. Medical professionals and others wear masks all day, every day. There is no reason why the majority of Nova Scotians can't wear one for shorter periods when they can't ensure physical distancing.

Can you get a document to show proving that you have a medical reason for not wearing a mask?

We will not issue or ask for a medical certificate so please do not go to your doctor's office asking for one. Please do not look for reasons to not wear a mask.

Please be aware of a fake document that is circulating that suggests it is proof from public health officials that the bearer cannot wear a mask. No public health agency has authorized this document.

What constitutes a non-medical mask? Could anything that covers the nose and mouth be accepted?

We encourage people to use a traditional non-medical mask. There are many local suppliers making and selling them, and while prices vary, some are quite economical. You can also make one with a bandana or similar piece of cloth folded in at least three layers of fabric. The Public Health Agency of Canada offers instructions: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks/sew-no-sew-instructions-non-medical-masks-face-coverings.html>

How do you properly wear a non-medical mask?

People should learn how to put on and take off a mask safely. Do not touch your mask when you are wearing it. Learn more here: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/covid-19-safely-use-non-medical-mask-face-covering.html>

Can I wear a face shield in place of a non-medical mask?

We strongly recommend that Nova Scotians wear non-medical masks to avoid spreading COVID-19 to other people, and must wear them on public transportation starting July 24. Nova Scotians should not wear a face shield instead of a non-medical mask. It protects the wearer's eyes but does not protect other people if the wearer coughs or sneezes.

If you're wearing a mask, does that mean you don't have worry about other public health measures?

No, masks need to be used as part of the package of personal protective measures: physical distance as much as possible, limit the number of people you get together with, stay home if you are unwell, use good hand washing and cough hygiene, and clean common surfaces and objects.

What about people who can't afford a mask or who forget theirs?

Many masks are very affordable, but we are looking at ways to make sure people are able to access a mask regardless of their situation. Government will help transportation services with supplies of masks for people who can't bring their own.

Do people have to wear a mask while they are waiting for a bus, or just when they get on one?

We strongly recommend people wear masks when physical distancing is difficult. At some bus stops, especially inside and around main terminals, there can be a lot of people so even if you are waiting outside, you should wear a mask. If there are very few people and lots of room for distancing, you don't need to wear the mask while you wait.

Are masks mandatory for people in their own private vehicles? What about people carpooling?

People do not need to wear a mask in their own private vehicles. We would strongly recommend that they do if they are carpooling or if they need to drive someone who is not in their household or close social group.

Are masks mandatory for limos and other car services?

Yes, we consider limos and other car services to be the same as taxis.

Why not make masks mandatory on provincial ferries (Englishtown, LaHave, etc) or on ferries to and from Nova Scotia?

There are options on these ferries to stay in your car or maintain physical distance from other people. Masks are mandatory on transit ferries like the ones that cross Halifax Harbour.

Why not make masks mandatory on tour buses and motor coaches?

We are meeting with them about how they can operate safely.

How will thing work for masks on school buses?

Non-medical masks will be mandatory on schools buses. We are looking at the school bus setting as part of our work with Education and Early Childhood Development on plans for the 2020-21 school year.

Why not make masks mandatory for employers who transport workers with their own private buses or other vehicles?

We are not making masks mandatory in this setting but we do strongly recommend them.

What happens if someone refuses to put on a mask or takes it off during the ride? Can the driver refuse to let them on or kick them off?

Owners of public transportation systems can develop their own policies and procedures. We are reaching out to hold meetings with them next week to prepare for implementation on July 24.

Who do passengers complain to if the rule isn't being enforced?

Passengers should take the issue to the owner of the transportation service – such as a transit authority or a taxi company. If the issue is not resolved, they can call the Safety Division at the Department of Labour and Advanced Education.

Who does the driver complain to if passengers or other drivers aren't following the rule?

A driver should bring the issue to his or her OHS committee if there is one, or to their employer. If the issue is not resolved, they can call the Safety Division at the Department of Labour and Advanced Education.