

# Consumers avoid indoor environments as winter escalates airborne spread of COVID

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- New phs Index reveals places people are avoiding due to COVID as 14% of UK premises and 51% of food and drink venues shutdown during tightened restrictions
- 68% of consumers are concerned about catching COVID in indoor places
- Two thirds fear social distancing will be ditched over Christmas
- One in five report poor hygiene while half experience lack of social distancing
- One in 10 have felt so uncomfortable by COVID risk they have walked out of a premises
- 61% believe air purifiers should be mandatory indoors to curb infection risk

One in 10 people have walked out of a premises because they have felt so uncomfortable about the risk of catching COVID-19, reveals a new report by facilities services provider phs Group (<https://www.phs.co.uk/>).

In new, independently-commissioned consumer research, phs uncovers that more than one in five consumers have experienced inadequate hygiene measures and nearly half (46%) have been faced with a lack of social distancing. This has led to 29% saying they are not confident in the hygiene measures within the places they visit and 34% lacking confidence in their social distancing practices

The findings are reported by phs Group in its latest phs index report (<https://www.phs.co.uk/about-phs/the-phs-index-how-covid-19-impacted-uk-organisations/>) published today (10 December 2020) analysing the impact of COVID restrictions on organisation closures and consumer confidence in visiting premises during the coronavirus pandemic. It particularly highlights consumer concerns on the airborne risk of spreading COVID-19 indoors.

Within the report, new phs Index data reveals as many as 14% of UK premises shut again during the peak of tightening restrictions across the four nations. In England, the closure rate at the peak of lockdown was 15% with 12% shut during the firebreak in Wales, 11% shutting in Scotland and 9% in Northern Ireland. The most impacted sectors are the arts, entertainment and recreation and food services and accommodation with more than half of premises shutting down at the peak of restrictions (54% and 51% respectively). Central London is disproportionately affected region with 27% of premises closed. The latest closure rates are lower than during the first national lockdown from March 2020 when 43% of premises shutdown nationally and 56% closed in Central London but still impacts a significant proportion which have had to face repeated, prolonged closures. Worryingly for businesses, 46% of consumers believe that the closing down of venues such as pubs, restaurants, gyms and non-essential retail makes them feel they are not COVID-safe environments.

Unveiling insights into Brits' attitudes towards visiting indoor premises, phs reveals more than two-thirds (68%) of consumers are concerned about catching COVID-19 indoors with 54% saying they are more concerned as winter approaches. Almost half (47%) do not want to spend time in indoor environments due to the risk of coronavirus and nearly a third (30%) say they only do so if they have to. While 51% say they have avoided indoor settings due to the risk of catching COVID-19, 41% did so as they were worried others would come too close to them. A quarter (26%) avoided places as they didn't trust the measures in place

were enough to protect them.

With Christmas playing heavily on the minds of the nation, 47% of people say they have already changed their usual plans. The majority agree that Christmas interactions may increase the spread of COVID-19; phs found 66% are concerned people will be less vigilant of social distancing rules indoors over the festive season. The research found 37% confess being less vigilant at social distancing when spending time indoors with friends or family.

The call to action from consumers for organisations is clear. 54% say organisations should be doing more to reduce the risk of infection. 51% say premises should limit numbers indoors, 46% call for mask enforcement at entrances and 39% want someone to be tasked with enforcing physical distancing indoors. 29% of people call for organisations to install air purifiers indoors. However, once they learned how air purifiers clean the air by physically removing impurities such as germs, viruses and pollutants, as many as 61% say air purifiers should be mandatory in indoor environments to curb the spread of the virus. Consumers say these measures would make them feel safer, reassured, that the premises had their best interests in mind and, crucially, more likely to visit

Within the report, phs air quality experts have teamed up with a leading Cambridge University professor to examine the airborne risk of coronavirus indoors; a risk they suggest is not being taken seriously enough in the fight against infection.

Fluid mechanics expert Professor Paul Linden, of Cambridge University, commented: "Indoor air quality is a real concern in the spread of coronavirus. Much of the focus on COVID-19 has been the transmission by physical touch and larger droplets expelled when an infected person breathes, talks and coughs but what we're not talking about enough is the smaller infected droplets and particles which remain airborne and are not contained by masks. Growing evidence indicates these infected aerosols linger in the air for hours at a time and can be spread around a building – even after an infected person has left creating an extended risk of transmission. During the winter, we're more likely to be spending time indoors with less natural ventilation, meaning the air we breathe could be more concentrated with particulates. If we fail to combat the risk of airborne infection, we risk being exposed by a large gap in our defences. Improving indoor air quality must be at the forefront if we truly want to create COVID-safe environments."

David Taylor-Smith, CEO of phs Group, said: "The research demonstrates the extent of concern consumers feel about spending time indoors and the risk of catching COVID-19, so much so they are actively avoiding certain indoor premises and want organisations to do more to make them feel safer and combat the spread. While this is vital from a health perspective, as an economy it is also essential organisations take the right measures to stay open wherever they can and welcome staff, visitors and customers into their premises safely. They need to bolster public confidence and reassure people they are doing everything possible to be COVID safe.

"We've all heard the message of 'hands, face and space' and these are important aspects in infection control combated by hand washing, masks and social distancing. But what about the air we breathe? Concerns over indoor air quality have been growing for some time and with the combination of winter and Christmas the risk of COVID-19, is further increasing. Scientists worldwide are pointing to

the airborne risk of contamination and this urgently needs addressing to enable people to spend time in indoor settings more safely. Organisations using air purifiers are already converts in providing cleaner, fresher, healthier air and proving to their building users that they are taking the risks seriously for now and for the future. It is a difficult time for businesses right now. With so many premises hit again by closure, there are enough reasons for consumers to keep away, fears organisations are not doing enough to reduce the risk should not be one of them.”

For the full phs Index and indoor air quality report, visit [www.phs.co.uk/phsIndex](http://www.phs.co.uk/phsIndex)

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#### Key findings from the phs Index #2 Report

- The winter problem; consumer sentiment to spending time indoors

68% of consumers admit they are concerned about catching COVID-19 in indoor environments with 60% believing there is a “high risk” of doing so. 54% say winter has made them more concerned about the risk of infection indoors.

- Concerns for Christmas

47% have already changed their usual plans for the festive season due to worries about coronavirus. And most are worried that festive behaviours around Christmas will have a negative impact on following the rules; 66% are concerned people will be less vigilant of social distancing rules indoors over the festive season, rising to 78% in the over 55 age group. Women are more likely to be concerned than men (72% of women compared to 61% of men).

- The places people are avoiding

49% admit they do not want to spend time in indoor environments because of the risk of coronavirus and 30% say they only visit indoor environments if they have to. In fact, consumers have been actively avoiding certain settings over the last six months. Most have chosen to avoid public transport (avoided by 44%), followed by restaurants, cafes and pubs which 42% say they have avoided. 42% say they have avoided friends’ houses and more than a third have avoided leisure centres, hotels and gyms (38%, 37% and 36% respectively). Potentially worryingly, 34% have avoided the dentist and 29% have avoided visiting hospitals and GP surgeries. 23% have avoided shops and supermarkets and 16% have avoided their workplace.

The biggest reason for avoiding certain indoor settings was to avoid catching COVID-19, given by 51% of consumers. However, fears over non-compliance was second; 41% of people say they avoided places as they were worried others would come too close to them and not adhere to social distancing. 26% avoid places as they don’t trust the measures in place were enough to protect them and a similar proportion (23%) did so as they didn’t know enough about what the premises has done to make it COVID safe.

- Consumers COVID confessions

46% of consumers report they have experienced others not socially distancing while 15% confess not always socially distancing from others. Spending time with loved ones is tempting more consumers to not socially distance; 37% of consumers admit they are less vigilant at socially distancing indoors when they are with friends or family.

10% of consumers confess to not always wearing a face covering in public spaces while 14% admit not sanitising or hand washing as regularly as they should.

Shockingly, 21% have experienced situations where adequate hygiene measures are either not provided or being adhered to. In fact, 13% have walked out of an indoor environment because they haven't felt comfortable while 17% say they've gone so far as holding their breath while walking through a premises or past another person. Worryingly, 29% of consumers say they are not confident in the hygiene measures within local businesses while 34% are not confident in their social distancing practices.

- Call to action

The majority of consumers (54%) think organisations should be doing more to reduce the risk of viruses, including COVID-19, spreading over the winter months. 51% say premises should limit the number allowed indoors, 46% call for mask enforcement at entrances with 39% wanting someone to be tasked with enforcing physical distancing indoors. 42% of consumers think organisations should provide more sanitising stations and 35% think temperatures should be checked on entry. 29% of consumers believe organisations should install air purifiers to clean indoor air. Once they learned air purifiers clean the air by physically removing impurities such as germs, viruses and pollutants, 61% stated they should be mandatory in indoor environments to curb the spread of the virus. Communication is also key with 32% saying premises such be demonstrating the measures they are taking before people enter. Consumers say these measures would make them feel safer, reassured and trust that the premises had their best interests in mind. Crucially, they would be more likely to visit the premises.

- Premises closed by second wave of lockdowns

Analysing customer data, based on 120,000 customers servicing 300,000 premises, phs reports 14% of premises closed in November as restrictions tightened across the UK. In England, 15% of premises shutdown during the peak of lockdown compared to 12% during Wales' fire-break. In Scotland, 11% closed as a result of tiered restrictions and in Northern Ireland, 9% shut down during its latest lockdown. phs data indicates Central London is bearing the brunt of the impact with 27% of premises shutdown in November. The good news is that closure rates are lower now than during the first lockdown when 43% of UK premises shutdown (51% in Scotland, 43% in England, 42% in Wales and 32% in Northern Ireland). However, repeated and prolonged closures are still putting substantial pressure on a significant proportion of organisations at a time when footfall to these premises is also reduced; the phs Index indicates occupancy rate for these buildings was down 17% in September nationally and 38% lower in Central London.

The food services and accommodation sector (including restaurants, pubs, cafes and hotels) is no longer the most impacted by closures during national shutdowns. In the last month, 51% of food services and accommodation premises shutdown compared to 73% earlier this year. This indicates innovation within the industry in repurposing for takeaway and delivery services to enable businesses to continue trading during restrictions. However, closures have still affected more than half the industry. Meanwhile, the arts, entertainment and recreation sector has become the most affected with 54% of premises closed over the last month while 15% of financial, administration and support services premises closed their doors, largely driven by home working of office staff.

When it comes to re-openings, 92% of UK premises were open as of December 6, equating to 8% still closed compared to pre-pandemic levels. England has the least number of closures at 7%, followed by Wales at 8%.

Scotland's closures have crept up during continued tiered restrictions to 12%. However, in the midst of its second autumn lockdown, Northern Ireland has seen a doubling in its rate of closures in the last month with 23% of premises now closed. As of December 6, 28% of accommodation and food services, 23% of arts, entertainment and recreation and 11% of finance, administrative and support services premises remained closed compared to pre-pandemic levels.

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Consumer research: The research for phs Group was carried out online by Opinion Matters between 11/11/2020 and 13/11/2020 amongst a panel resulting in 2,005 UK adults responding. All research conducted adheres to the MRS Codes of Conduct (2019) in the UK and ICC/ESOMAR World Research Guidelines. Opinion Matters is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office and is fully compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act (2018).

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About us

phs Group is the leading hygiene services provider in the UK, Ireland and Spain.

Our team of over 3,000 expert personnel provides washroom, floorcare, healthcare and a range of specialist services to over 120,000 customers ranging from large single sites, to multi-national restaurant chains, healthcare establishments and small owner occupied shops. Wherever we're needed, we're on your doorstep.

phs provides vital workplace services to organisations which improve the well-being of employees and customer. It makes over 3.6 million visits each year, whether it's disposing of sanitary waste and nappies, installing hand dryers, soap dispensers, consumables and air purifiers or supplying floor mats to prevent slips, trips and falls. You'll also find phs working within the healthcare industry disposing of clinical, pharmaceutical and dental waste. phs services also include the provision of indoor and outdoor plants, electrical and gas compliance testing services, industrial workwear, and waste compactor and crate rental.

What makes phs different? It's commitment to do the right thing. Through its LifeCycle Strategy, phs aim to divert up to 95% of our customers' hygiene waste away from landfill, by using sustainable disposal methods, creating power for the national grid. It's helping clean up the ocean from plastic by using ghost fishing nets to create Econyl floor mats. It has patented products which deliver significant water and cost savings. Its air purifiers help to improve employee wellbeing.

By using phs, organisations can make a difference to the environment and their bottom line as well as

telling a good news story. It's all about doing the right thing.

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