



COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Update – Food Safety

The CSNA is monitoring the evolving COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak closely and is following official Government advice.

Can COVID-19 be passed on through food?

No reported cases of COVID-19 have been linked to contamination of food. The main risk of transmission is from close contact with infected people. The advice to food businesses and consumers is to maintain good hygiene practices and to wash your hands regularly. Thorough cooking will kill the virus.

How is COVID-19 passed on?

The virus is commonly passed on:

- directly, through contact with an infected person's body fluids (for example, droplets from coughing or sneezing)
- indirectly, through contact with surfaces that an infected person has coughed or sneezed on

Current information suggests that the virus could survive up to 72 hours (3 days) on hard surfaces depending on the material. However, the numbers of virus will reduce considerably over that time as it dies off. Simple household disinfectants can kill it.

What can food workers do to prevent the spread of COVID-19?

Normal fitness to work procedures operated in food businesses should ensure that infected workers do not handle food. Staff should not work if they have any of the symptoms of COVID-19. Should an infected worker handle food it is possible that they could introduce virus to the food they are working on, or onto surfaces within the food business, by coughing and sneezing, or through hand contact, unless they strictly follow good personal hygiene practices.

These include:

- proper hand hygiene
- cough/cold hygiene practices
- safe food practices
- avoiding close contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing

In addition, the HSE is advising 'social distancing' to help slow the spread of coronavirus. [See more information on social distancing on the HSE website.](#)

Is handwashing important?

Yes, handwashing is extremely important. Food workers must wash hands:

- before starting work
- after coughing, sneezing or blowing nose
- before handling cooked or ready-to-eat food
- after handling or preparing raw food
- after handling waste
- after cleaning duties
- after using the toilet
- after eating, drinking or smoking
- after handling money
- generally, on a regular basis

Good hygiene and cleaning are also important to avoid cross-contamination between raw or undercooked foods and cooked or ready-to-eat foods in the kitchen.

What is the proper hand washing technique?

- wet hands under warm running water
- use enough soap to form a good lather
- rub all parts of hands with soap and water
- lather for at least 20 seconds, vigorously and thoroughly rubbing all hand surfaces, including the fingertips and thumbs
- rinse hands thoroughly with running water
- dry hands thoroughly, using disposable paper towels, if possible

Do food workers need to wear gloves?

No. It is perfectly acceptable to prepare and handle food with bare hands provided proper hand washing procedures are in place.

Gloves may be used by food workers, but they must ensure that the gloves are changed frequently and that hands are washed between glove changes and when gloves are removed.

Gloves must be changed after carrying out non-food related activities such as opening/closing doors by hand, emptying bins, handling money, etc.

Food workers should be aware that wearing gloves can allow bacteria to build up on the surface of the hands, so hand washing is extremely important when gloves are removed to avoid subsequent contamination of food.

It is important to wash your hands even when wearing gloves, as contaminated gloves can spread germs to your hands when removing the gloves.

If I wear gloves, is handwashing still important?

Proper hand washing is extremely important, whether using gloves or not. If using gloves, hand washing should be carried out before putting gloves on, between glove changes and after gloves are removed.

The problem with the use of gloves is that if staff are not given proper training in food safety, gloves are often seen as a barrier to food contamination. Staff may then carry out many non-food related tasks (e.g. handling money, emptying bins, wiping counters) while wearing the same pair of gloves that they then use to prepare food.

When wearing gloves for a prolonged period of time, without frequent changing and hand washing, bacteria on the skin rapidly multiply due to the warm, moist environment created by the gloves. If the gloves tear or are removed and food is handled without hand washing, a high number of bacteria can be transferred to the food.

[WHO advice on use of gloves](#)

Does washing-up or using a dishwasher eliminate the virus?

As with soap, washing-up liquid and dishwasher detergents are likely to inactivate the virus. In particular, washing and drying dishes in a dishwasher at 60°C or higher is effective at eliminating any risk.

Is there a risk to consumers from 'open' food?

There is currently little scientific information about the survival of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) on the surface of open food. Work with similar viruses shows that some food surfaces don't allow the virus to survive at all, but some do.

Therefore, it is important to maintain good hygiene practices around open food (e.g. unpackaged bread, cakes, fruit, salad bars etc.) and this will reduce the risk of contamination of the food. People should strictly observe good personal hygiene practices at all times around open food.

Customers and food businesses are expected to behave in a hygienic manner. Food businesses are obliged to monitor open food displays to make sure they are hygienic and avoid having such open food displays near tills or serve-over counters, where customers are ordering or paying for food.

How should food businesses manage open food displays?

To help avoid the transmission of COVID-19 through surface contact, frequent washing and sanitising of all food contact surfaces and utensils is advised.

Food service workers must practice frequent hand washing and, if using gloves, must change them before and after preparing food. Food service workers must ensure frequent cleaning and sanitising of counters, serving utensils and condiment containers.

If possible, hand sanitiser should be made available to consumers on their way in and out of the food premises.

What extra measures can food business owners/managers take?

Social Distancing

Where employees attend work [the HSE has recommended that social distancing is implemented to help slow the spread of COVID-19](#). This involves maintaining a distance of 2 metres (6.5 feet) between people and reduced social interactions.

To implement social distancing, food businesses could:

- limit the number of staff in a kitchen or food preparation area at any one time
- space out workstations and food preparation areas, if possible
- limit the number of people (staff, delivery drivers, customers) who can come into your premises at any one time
- use spacing measures (e.g. floor markers) at tills or queues, if possible
- use a ticketing system if appropriate

People showing any sign of COVID-19 symptoms (fever, new persistent cough, shortness of breath) should avoid any interactions with other members of the public. They should avoid going to shops, supermarkets, take-aways, etc.

Staff Awareness

Food business owners should ensure that staff are aware of the COVID-19 situation and the [advice being given by the HSE](#) in relation to symptoms, social distancing, restricted movement, self-isolation and travel.

Touch Points

Touch points e.g. trolleys, keypads, door handles etc., should be cleaned more frequently.

Wipes (or other forms of sanitisation) could be provided for customers to clean the handles of shopping trolleys and baskets.

Ladles, tongs, condiment holders etc. should be washed and sanitised frequently.

Keep doors open where possible to minimise contact.

General

Avoid handling money and encourage the use of contactless payments if possible. If food workers must handle money, it is important to wash hands afterwards and always before handling food.

Some food businesses have stopped accepting 'keep' cups/containers as an extra precautionary measure and are just using disposable drinking containers. This is a measure put in place by individual businesses to reduce risk to workers and should be supported by customers. (It is not a requirement set out by the FSAI or by the HSE.)

Hand sanitisers should be provided by businesses where possible.

In general, food business owners should remember that they have particular responsibilities under food law and must maintain proper hygiene practices at all times.

They should, in general:

- ensure that staff are trained appropriately in food hygiene and hygienic practices
- ensure effective supervision of staff to reinforce hygienic practices
- provide the correct facilities e.g. hand washing, toilets, to enable staff (including delivery drivers) to practice good hygiene
- ensure staff and contractors report any physical signs/symptoms of illness, before commencing work or while in the workplace
- keep vigilant and ensure that staff are not ill and are fit to work

[Further information on allergens](#)

How do I manage transport and delivery of food?

If you are delivering food, you must think about the food safety risks involved. Make sure you consider the following.

Transport containers must:

- be kept clean and in good condition
- protect food from contamination
- be easy to clean and/or disinfect
- not be used to transport goods other than foods where this could be a source of contamination
- allow for separation of food from non-food items, like detergents and toiletries
- allow for separation of raw foods that require cooking from foods that will not be cooked before eating

Transport vehicles must:

- be kept clean and in good condition
- allow for the separation of foods from other goods that may cause contamination. For example, plants or cleaning chemicals
- allow for separation of raw foods that require cooking from foods that will not be cooked before eating
- be thoroughly cleaned if used for goods other than food to ensure no contamination

Temperature control

Food must be kept at the correct temperature during transport to prevent the growth of food poisoning bacteria.

- food that needs to be refrigerated must be kept below 5°C
- hot food must be kept above 63°C
- frozen food must be kept at -18°C

Make sure containers/vehicles used for transport or deliveries can maintain the above temperatures. This can be done using either refrigeration or insulated containers.

Delivery driver/personnel

- follow HSE guidance on social distancing when picking up deliveries and passing deliveries to customers
- wear suitable, clean and where necessary, protective clothing
- maintain a high degree of personal cleanliness
- sanitise hands before and after each delivery transaction
- the use of gloves is not recommended as this can give a false sense of security. Hand washing/sanitising is best practice

Do I need to recall food products if a food worker was potentially shedding the virus while working?

There is currently no evidence to indicate transmission of COVID-19 through food or food packaging.

Food businesses are required to maintain clean and sanitised facilities and food contact surfaces. Therefore, a 'deep clean' is advised following potential infection of a food worker in the premises along with exclusion of co-workers who are close contacts (anyone who has spent more than 15 minutes within 2 meters of an infected person) in line with HSE advice.

If a staff member in my food business has tested positive for COVID-19, do I need to close?

Food businesses should follow the advice of the HSE. Any decision to close a business will be based on public health risk of person-to-person transmission and not based on a food safety risk.

If a food worker has tested positive for COVID-19, do I need to advise other food workers to self-isolate?

Food businesses should follow the advice of the HSE.

What should food business owners/managers do if they have a supply chain problem caused by COVID-19?

Due to a disruption in their supply chain, certain ingredients and packaging might be in short supply and food businesses may be considering some of the following:

- leaving out or substituting ingredients in a product,
- changing their packaging,
- changing their process

In these situations, it is important that food businesses remember their legal obligations to only place safe food on the market.

Any change to product, packaging or processing requires a full review of the businesses food safety management system (GHP and HACCP).

This will allow them to:

- risk assess any food safety issues that could result from the proposed changes
- put in place controls to manage any risks identified
- document the changes

Examples of issues to consider include:

- the introduction of allergens when changing ingredients and/or ingredient suppliers
- safe shelf-life if packaging changes and/or the product is formulated differently
- the introduction of new microbiological, physical, chemical hazards with new ingredients

There may be other issues depending on the type of business/product involved.

For food businesses using processing equipment:

If the supply chain for spare parts is unavailable, be careful to not compromise the safety of the food by using improvised solutions.

Is there a risk with food products or ingredients which are imported from an affected country/region?

No, COVID-19 is not transmitted through food or ingredients. Even if surfaces or packaging have been contaminated, the virus will only survive on such surfaces for a short period, therefore there is no risk of contamination.

What is the advice when making food for vulnerable people?

Whether you are an existing food business, or a group of community volunteers, if you are making food for vulnerable people, it is important that the food you are producing is safe to eat. As older people, immunocompromised or ill people that are self-isolating or cocooning may be more vulnerable to food poisoning, you should follow proper food safety practices to ensure that the food you are providing is safe to eat.

Some important points to bear in mind:

- staff should practice good personal hygiene
- everyone must wash their hands before any food preparation commences
- keep hot food hot and cold food cold
- clean and sanitise as you go
- prevent cross-contamination between raw and cooked foods