

Preventing the spread of COVID-19: Guidance for food establishments

Many parts across the world and Washington are experiencing an outbreak of respiratory illness caused by a novel coronavirus. This virus can spread from person-to-person and the number of cases detected in the United States and many other countries is growing.

As new information emerges, please remind your community that the risk of COVID-19 is not at all connected with race, ethnicity or nationality. [Stigma will not help to fight the illness](#). Sharing accurate information during a time of heightened concern is one of the best things we can do to keep rumors and misinformation from spreading.

What is coronavirus?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that usually cause mild respiratory illnesses such as the common cold. Some coronaviruses have caused more severe illness, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new coronavirus that was not identified in humans before December 2019.

What are common symptoms of COVID-19?

Signs and symptoms of infection with COVID-19 include fever (100.4°F or greater with an oral thermometer), cough, and shortness of breath. Symptoms of COVID-19 may appear in as few as 2 days or as long as 14 days after exposure to the virus.

Some people who get COVID-19 may have only mild illness. However, the virus can also cause pneumonia, which may be severe.

People are encouraged to contact their medical provider if they have developed symptoms and have been in close contact with a person known to have COVID-19, or if they have traveled to an area with ongoing spread of the virus.

How does the virus spread?

Infected people can spread COVID-19 through their respiratory secretions, such as when they cough or sneeze in close contact to others. The droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. Other examples of close contact that may spread illness include kissing or hugging, sharing eating or drinking utensils, talking to someone nearby, and touching someone directly. Close contact does not include activities like walking by a person or briefly sitting across a waiting room or office.

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While COVID-19 primarily spreads person-to-person, it may also be capable of spreading like some other coronaviruses through contact with a contaminated surface.

Prevention Recommendations

Food has not been identified as a likely source of COVID-19 infection at this time. However, it is important to follow current food safety standards to help protect workers and customers from COVID-19. In addition, expanding your current food safety practices will help slow the spread of respiratory viruses in the community, and help reduce working days lost due to illness.

1. Review Employee Health Policies and Procedures

Employee health policies should prohibit food workers from working in food establishments while sick.

- Review your sick leave policies and expand upon paid leave options for your workers, if possible. Offering paid sick leave will help mitigate the economic impacts of missed work for your employees, while simultaneously keeping the rest of your employees and customers well.
- Talk with your workers about employee health requirements and expectations. Now is a good time to retrain your employees as needed to make sure everyone is on the same page.
- Workers that are possibly sick with the symptoms matching COVID-19 should stay home. If possible, employees with family members/caregivers with symptoms matching COVID-19 should also stay home.
- Food workers and managers with coughing, shortness of breath, fever, or other symptoms of illness should not return to work until they are symptom-free. Current guidance is to stay home until at least 72 hours after symptoms have gone away. This may be altered by medical diagnosis, local health direction, changing community conditions, or other factors.
- Per CDC guidelines, employers are encouraged not to require employees to provide a doctor's note to return to work, because doing so will burden the medical system.
- Learn more by reviewing [DOH's Resources for Workplaces and Employers](#).

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2. Increase Hand Hygiene

- Ensure all employees wash their hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Make sure each handwashing station is always stocked with soap, paper towels, and warm, running water.
- Even with proper handwashing, Washington requires that food workers use a barrier such as tongs, gloves, or other utensil to prevent direct hand contact with food. The virus is likely to be inactivated by proper cooking temperatures; it is important to use gloves or other barriers to prevent touching foods that will not be fully cooked.
- Recommend all employees cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue. If a tissue is not available, employees can sneeze into their shirt sleeve, but NOT into their hands. Discard tissues into a lined garbage bin and wash hands immediately with soap and water after each cough or sneeze.
- Remind employees to avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth to help slow the spread of germs. The current food safety rule requires workers wash their hands whenever they touch their eyes, nose, or mouth.
- To help customers keep their germs to themselves, provide tissues, no-touch waste bins, and alcohol-based hand antiseptic rubs (with at least 60% ethyl alcohol as the active ingredient) in customer areas.

3. Clean and Sanitize

It is expected that the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 is, like other coronaviruses, also susceptible to EPA-registered sanitizers and disinfectants. As of now there is no recommended change to currently-approved sanitizers.

- Only use sanitizers registered with EPA as a sanitizer. Read the sanitizer label and follow usage directions. Be sure to measure the concentration of the sanitizer with test strips to make sure the active ingredient is available.
- The EPA has a [list of registered sanitizers](#) labeled for use against the novel coronavirus. Note: There may be additional disinfectants that meet the criteria and EPA will update the list as needed.

- When disinfecting for coronavirus, EPA recommends following the product label use directions for enveloped viruses, as indicated by the approved emerging viral pathogen claim on the master label. If the directions for use for viruses/virucidal activity list different contact times or dilutions, use the longest contact time or most concentrated solution.
- Note: These disinfection concentrations may exceed the allowable levels allowed for use on food contact surfaces such as dishes and utensils. Be sure to follow the label directions for FOOD CONTACT SURFACES when using the chemical near or on utensils and food contact surfaces.
- If you have questions about your particular sanitizer, please carefully read the package label or reach out to your chemical provider for more information.
- Be sure to wash and rinse equipment of visible dirt or debris before sanitizing. Sanitizers work better on clean surfaces.
- All food contact surfaces such as utensils, cutting boards, and serving ware must be washed, rinsed, and sanitized often throughout the day. Be sure dishes are properly washed and sanitized with chemicals or a high-heat dishwasher after each customer's use.
- All nonfood contact surfaces, such as equipment, counters, menus, tables, chairs, bathrooms, and doors should be cleaned of spills as needed and sanitized often. Wash, rinse, and sanitize nonfood contact surfaces that employee and customers touch throughout the day.
- To help protect your workers and customers, increase the frequency of cleaning and sanitizing customer-access areas. Use a separate wiping cloth and sanitizing solution when sanitizing the front of house/customer-access areas.
- Consider removing decorative objects, papers, and other unneeded materials from counters to allow for thorough sanitization of unobstructed surfaces.
- Sanitize outside of condiment containers and other items frequently handled such as doorknobs, backs of chairs, faucet handles, tabletops, and menus at least daily.
- At this time, there are no statewide restrictions on customer self-service such as beverage dispensers, bulk food containers, or salad bars. To help customers reduce illness wash, rinse, and sanitize tongs and other utensils in self-service

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areas often throughout the day and provide alcohol-based hand antiseptic rubs at the entrance to the facility.

4. Going Forward

As with any newly emerging infectious disease, knowledge evolves with time. Early on, it is difficult to know the ways in which the disease spreads, how effectively it spreads from person to person, and how severe the infection is. We will continue to update the [Novel Coronavirus Outbreak website](#) and this document as more information becomes available.

Connect with your [local health department](#) to ask any questions specific to your area.

Additional answers to food safety questions

Does coronavirus spread through food?

It is unlikely, and there is no current evidence, that the novel virus is transmitted through food or water. History with previous outbreaks of coronavirus such as SARS and MERS suggest that people do not likely become infected with coronavirus through food. However, limited research on the new coronavirus indicates that it can be shed in stool. It is not known at this time whether the virus can make people sick after it has passed through the digestive tract.

While we don't believe the novel virus can spread through food, we do know other germs can. We highly encourage people to practice routine food safety procedures to reduce risk:

- **Only handle food when healthy.** People that are coughing, feverish, short of breath, vomiting or have diarrhea or other symptoms of illness should stay out of the kitchen.
- **Wash hands to reduce risk of illness.** Always wash hands thoroughly before and during food preparation.
- **Rinse fruits and vegetables before cutting or eating.** Rinse raw agricultural products, such as heads of lettuce, under running water prior to cutting or serving. Bagged lettuces that are ready-to-eat do not need additional washing.
- **Thoroughly cook whatever you can.** Cooking destroys many germs, including coronavirus.
- **Clean and sanitize food contact surfaces.** Wash, rinse, and sanitize cutting boards, tables, utensils, and other food contact surfaces often.

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What is the role of money in the spread of COVID-19?

According to CDC, money is not likely a primary mode of transmission of coronavirus, however, it may be possible to transfer the virus by touching a contaminated surface and then touching the mouth, nose, or eyes. Customers and employees are encouraged to properly wash their hands often throughout the day, including after handling money, and always before they eat or touch their eyes, nose, and mouth.

Can a food worker who is symptom-free get tested? What if they've been asked to self-isolate for 14 days because they meet the definition of close contact to someone that might have COVID-19?

At this time, we do not recommend testing for people without symptoms because it is hard to interpret negative results. If someone has been exposed but is not yet sick, it may just be too early to detect the virus. In addition, a negative result would not decrease the isolation period. If the local health authority or health care provider indicates isolation, please complete the full 14 days to help ensure we limit the spread of the virus in our community.

Additional COVID-19 Resources

- [Novel Coronavirus Outbreak 2020](#), Washington State Department of Health
- [2019 Novel Coronavirus, Wuhan, China](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- [Resources for Workplaces and Employers](#)
- [Coronavirus and Pandemic Preparedness for the Food Industry](#), FMI Food Industry Association
- [Coronavirus: What Can You Do?](#) National Restaurant Association
- [Interim Guidance for Business and Employers to Plan and Respond to COVID-19](#) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- [Getting Your Workplace Ready for COVID-19](#) World Health Organization
- [Guidance for Travelers](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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