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Coronavirus / COVID-19 and Food Safety

Introduction

We are closely monitoring developments related to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in the U.S. and are working to provide our members and stakeholders with access to critical information and updates. Across the U.S. and around the globe, environmental health professionals are on the frontline of preventive public health services delivery, and we are committed to supporting the environmental health workforce to effectively and safely do their jobs.

This novel coronavirus, which started as a localized novel zoonotic disease outbreak in China, has now been [declared a pandemic](#) (global disease outbreak) by the World Health Organization (WHO) after having rapidly spread to most countries around the world. The disease, known as COVID-19, is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 betacoronavirus virus. Symptoms develop 2-14 days after exposure and include fever, cough, and shortness of breath. The majority of infections have been mild including symptoms such as fever and cough; however, severe life-threatening disease has developed in approximately 16% of cases according to initial reports.

If you think you have been exposed to COVID-19 and develop a fever and symptoms, such as cough or difficulty breathing, call your healthcare provider for medical advice.

While the current risk of infection for most people in the U.S. is low, some regions are currently experiencing large outbreaks, and as these and other current outbreaks continue to expand, and the number of cases increases, so will the risk of contracting the disease. As a result, it is critical to implement personal protective hygiene and other preventive health behaviors such as frequent handwashing with soap and water, social distancing, and using proper cough and sneeze etiquette.

Below you will find a list of frequently asked questions for food establishments.

FAQs for Food Establishments

Can my employees or customers get sick with coronavirus (COVID-19) from food?

- Currently there is no evidence that suggests food is associated with transmission of COVID-19.
- Unlike foodborne gastrointestinal viruses such as norovirus and hepatitis A, which often spread through contaminated food, COVID-19 is a virus that causes respiratory illness. Foodborne transmission is not expected at this time.
- As usual, it is important to follow good hygiene practices and safe food handling practices to [keep food safe](#).
- COVID-19 is spreading from person-to-person, so it is important that sick employees and sick customers stay home.

What should I do if one of my employees was diagnosed with coronavirus?

- If a person tests positive for COVID-19 infection it is important to communicate with your local or state health department.

- It is important to inform fellow employees of their possible exposure to the coronavirus, while keeping information about the sick person confidential. Employees should monitor themselves for symptoms of the disease.
- CDC has provided an [Interim US Guidance for Risk Assessment and Public Health Management of Persons with Potential Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID19\)](#).
- Ill persons can find more information from the CDC's [What do to if you are sick with coronavirus disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#).
- COVID-19 is spreading from person-to-person, so it is very important that sick employees and customers stay home.

One of my employees is sick but I don't think it is coronavirus. Can they still work?

- The CDC recommends that employees who have symptoms of acute respiratory illness stay home. and to not come to work until they are free of fever, signs of fever, and any other symptoms for at least 24-hours.
- Ill employees should notify their supervisor and stay home if they are sick.
- FDA's [Employee Health and Personal Hygiene Handbook](#) is a great resource for learning more on employee health and food safety.

How can I clean and sanitize my restaurant to prevent the spread of COVID-19?

- The Environmental Protection Agency has a list of registered disinfectants for use against SARS-CoV-2, the cause of COVID-19. Click [here](#) for the full, searchable list.
 - Within that list are two chemicals common to food processors, **quaternary ammonium (Quat)** and Sodium hypochlorite, more commonly known as **bleach**.
 - Use the list provided by the EPA to check the EPA registration number on the chemical label. If the registration number matches a product on the disinfectant list above, it can be used against COVID-19.
 - **IMPORTANT: Follow all manufacturer's instructions, paying close attention to the contact time, or the time the surface should remain wet and if the product is safe for use on food contact surfaces.**
 - Food establishments should engage in more frequent cleaning schedules at this time.

Should we be doing any special cleaning to stop the spread of COVID-19?

- Like other viruses, it is possible that the virus that causes COVID-19 can survive on surfaces.
- Because this is a novel virus, there is limited data on the specific time periods the virus may stay viable, however recent research shows the virus may be present on surfaces from a few hours to several days.
- It is important to frequently clean and sanitize high-touch surfaces in the work place including but not limited to the following: doorknobs, point of sale systems, cash registers, salt and pepper shakers, tabletops, countertops, buffet table utensils, coffee carafes, equipment buttons and handles.

We have a self-service food buffet at my food establishment. Should I take any special precautions?

- Although there is no current evidence to support the transmission of COVID-19 on foods, following the food safety rules and regulations set forth by your local health department is important for keeping customers and employees safe.
- The Food and Drug Administration has recommended ceasing all buffet operations due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Given the critical need to practice social distancing, we recommend that restaurants discontinue buffet service.

- Ensure sneeze guards are present on all buffets and are adequately protecting food
- Provide an alcohol-based (≥60%) hand sanitizer for employees and customers.
- Social distancing is recommended around the country, especially in areas where communities have had sustained high rates of transmission.

We offer door-to-door delivery service. Should we be taking any extra precautions?

- Social distancing across the country may increase the number of persons ordering food via delivery services.
- Managers and supervisors must ensure sick employees are sent home. Delivery drivers must not deliver foods if they have symptoms of illness.
- If an employee arrives at work exhibiting symptoms of illness, they should be sent home immediately.
- Like other viruses, it is possible that the virus that causes COVID-19 can survive on surfaces.
- It is important that all food handlers and delivery drivers follow proper [hand washing procedures](#) and good hygienic practices to keep themselves and their customers safe.
Protect delivery foods using appropriate containers from door-to-door or door-to-curb.
 - Use plastic or paper bags to protect food containers during transit.
 - Sealing a bag with a knot or using a sticker/staple to seal a paper bag is recommended for an additional layer of protection.

Will cooking a food kill the virus?

- Normal cooking times and temperatures, depending on the food product, should effectively kill viruses like coronavirus.
- Click [here](#) for more information on safe food handling from the FDA.

Can coronavirus be spread through money?

- The CDC indicates that money is not likely a primary mode of transmission, however as with many viruses, it is possible to transfer the virus from a surface to a person by touching a contaminated surface and then touching the mouth, nose, or eyes.
- It is important to wash your hands frequently for at least 20 seconds with soap and avoid touching your face including your eyes, nose, and mouth.

How can I help stop the spread of coronavirus in my community?

- COVID-19 is a new viral respiratory illness for which there is no vaccine available. Sustained community spread is ongoing due to the ease at which it spreads person-to-person. In order to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 in your community, it is critical to do the following:
 - It is important that sick people stay home and avoid contact with well people.
 - Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap frequently and avoid touching your face including the eyes, nose, and mouth.
 - Always wash your hands after using the bathroom, before eating, and after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
 - Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue and then throw the tissue in the trash.
 - Clean and sanitize high-touch surfaces frequently.

For more information, visit neha.org/coronavirus-covid-19