

FDA: SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) Is Not a Food Safety Threat

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As many Americans begin weeks of unwanted shut ins, the food industry is heading to work or working from home, with the goal of keeping a strong, safe, and abundant food supply. As recognized in guidance recently issued by the Department of Homeland Security, food producers and many of the businesses that support them are essential. Still, amidst the crisis, fears about the safety of food – and the ability of food and food packaging to transmit the novel coronavirus – have spread quickly. But the FDA has sought to reassure Americans that food is safe, providing a dedicated [page](#) for COVID-19 and stating that “[c]urrently there is no evidence of food or food packaging being associated with transmission of COVID-19.” The FDA’s remarks during a March 18th stakeholder briefing were similar.

The FDA continues to stress that COVID-19, at this time, is not known to be transmitted through food, and that a recall due to a sick worker would not be necessary, provided that good manufacturing practices are otherwise followed. The FDA advises that current good manufacturing practices and health hazard analyses mandated under the Food Safety Modernization Act are designed to address the challenges of preventing adulteration of food with pathogens. The FDA has also encouraged coordination with local and state officials, as protocols are likely to vary depending on the amount of community spread of COVID-19 in a particular geographic area, and has stated that questions such as whether a facility should be closed after a worker tests positive for COVID-19, and for how long, may vary and that food facilities need to work with state and local health departments, since the decisions are likely to be based on the risk of person-to-person transmission, rather than food safety.

Restaurants and retail establishments are finding their operations significantly curtailed by local and state orders intended to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19. Many retailers and restaurants have moved quickly to close higher-risk operations, such as self-serve buffets, or condiment bars or salad bars. During last week’s stakeholder call, FDA recommended that such offerings be temporarily closed. The FDA has also issued the following recommendations:

- Wash and sanitize food contact surfaces and utensils frequently;
- Food-service workers should practice frequent hand washing and glove changes before and after preparing food; and
- Frequently sanitize counters, cash registers and ordering stations, as well as condiment containers.

Some retailers have also opted to install temporary sneeze guards or similar shields in an effort to potentially reduce the risk to employees.

The FDA recommends using disinfectants outlined in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s [list](#) of disinfectants for use against SARS-CoV-2. As an extra precaution to help avoid the

transmission of COVID-19 through surface contact, the FDA recommends frequent washing and sanitizing of all food contact surfaces and utensils.

The FDA is also closely monitoring the food supply chain and does not expect nationwide shortages of food, although the agency does advise that in some cases the inventory of certain foods at grocery stores might be temporarily low before stores can restock. The FDA stated that food production and manufacturing are widely dispersed throughout the United States and no widespread disruptions have been reported in the supply chain. However, it is clear to many that the food industry must strive to be creative and proactive to avoid shortages due to quickly fluctuating demand. For example, many foodservice distributors have found themselves left with too much product, while grocery retailers are scrambling to fill empty shelves. While grocery retailers are recruiting workers and raising hourly pay, the International Food Service Distributors Association predicts a \$24 billion loss.^[1] Reallocation may very well be the next order of the day.

[1]Source: <https://www.foodsafetymagazine.com/news/foodservice-distributors-project-24-billion-loss-due-to-covid-19/>, last accessed March 23, 2020.