

Covid-19 Food Handlers Policy

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that cause respiratory illness including the common cold, seasonal flu, SARS and MERS. Covid-19 is a new strain.

Signs of Infection:

Signs of infection include high fever (>38°C) together with one or more respiratory symptoms like coughing, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties.

Severe symptoms include pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome and kidney failure.

Can Coronavirus be spread from food?

Experience with SARS and MERS suggest that people are not infected with the virus through food. So, it is unlikely the virus is passed on through food and there is no evidence yet of this happening with COVID-19 (coronavirus) to date.

Coronaviruses need a host (animal or human) to grow in and cannot grow in food. Thorough cooking is expected to kill the virus because we know that a heat treatment of at least 30min at 60°C is effective with SARS.

How is COVID-19 passed on?

Coronaviruses are most commonly passed between animals and people and from person to person. The source of COVID-19 (coronavirus) is believed to be animals, but the exact source is not yet known.

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 may survive a few hours on surfaces. Simple household disinfectants can kill it.

What can food workers do?

It is possible that infected food workers could introduce virus to the food they are working on by coughing and sneezing, or through hand contact, unless they strictly follow good personal hygiene practices.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) advises that standard recommendations to reduce exposure to and transmission of a range of illnesses are maintained. These include:

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

Food workers must wash hands:

- before starting work
- 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 blowing nose, sneezing or coughing
- after eating drinking or smoking
- after handling money

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.

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.

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 sanitizing 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 sanitizing of counters, serving utensils and condiment containers.

If possible, hand sanitizer 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 should be 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:

- space out tables and chairs in dining areas so they are 2 meters apart
- remove in-store seating if possible
- limit the number of people who can come into your food business / restaurant / supermarket / market stall etc. at any one time
- offer a 'take-away' food service if possible
- use spacing measures (e.g. floor markers) at tills or queues, if possible
- use a ticketing system if appropriate

Consumers 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, restaurants, take-aways, cafes, 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.

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 ceased using '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.

Wipes could be provided for customers to clean the handles of shopping trolleys and baskets.

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

Keep doors open where possible to minimise contact.

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 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

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 sanitized 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.

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
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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.

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.

Further Information

The Irish Government has issued the following health advice:

If you have been to an affected region in the last 14 days and:

Have symptoms (fever (high temperature), cough, shortness of breath, breathing difficulties):

- Stay away from other people
- Phone your GP without delay
- If you do not have a GP, phone 112 or 999

Do not have symptoms

- Visit the HSE website for advice

If you have been in close contact with a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19 in the last 14 days and:

As an added precaution, if you work with food and have suspected symptoms of respiratory illness you should also inform your employer and avoid preparing food for other people.