

Food safety during the COVID-19 outbreak

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In a question-and-answer session, Ohio State University assistant professor Sanja Ilic answers some of the crucial questions people are asking about how to keep their food safe during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Ilic is an assistant professor of human nutrition in the Department of Human Sciences, College of Education and Human Ecology, and an OSU Extension [food safety](#) state specialist.

Q: What do I need to know about food safety during the COVID-19 outbreak?

A: It is important to remember that COVID-19 is not a foodborne disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) are not aware of any reports suggesting COVID-19 can be transmitted by food or food packaging.

Coronavirus is not a gastrointestinal illness and cannot be contracted by ingesting contaminated foods. It cannot multiply on foods. Like any virus, it requires a host cell to multiply. COVID-19 attacks lung cells.

There is a good deal of misinformation out there. Please make sure to get your recommendations from credible sources.

Q. If I cannot get COVID-19 from food, how is it transmitted?

The virus most often transmits from person to person. This is because the virus resides in body fluids of the mouth and nose cavities.

The transmission occurs when the infected person sneezes, coughs or even talks. Droplets containing COVID-19 can reach a healthy person's nose, mouth or eyes.

In addition, if an infected person makes close contact, such as a handshake, the virus also can transmit to the healthy person. If

handwashing does not follow immediately, and if the healthy person touches their face, the virus will transmit.

The virus also can transmit if an infected person touches an object or surface without washing their hands. The surface can serve as a source of contamination for the virus to the healthy person if handwashing is not practiced.

Frequent handwashing, refraining from touching the face and diligently practicing physical distancing are the best way to protect oneself from contracting the virus.

Q. Because it has been said that COVID-19 can live on surfaces, such as my kitchen counter, what should I do to stay safe?

Viruses cannot multiply on inanimate surfaces; they require a living host to multiply.

However, a recent study found that the coronaviruses can persist and remain infectious for several hours and up to several days on inanimate surfaces. So, it is important to clean and sanitize surfaces.

This is always true for your kitchen counter, especially during food preparation. Some advice includes:

- Always clean dirty kitchen surfaces with soap and water before you sanitize. If you do not do this, the sanitation step is not going to be effective.
- Use a disinfectant product on the surfaces according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- Commercial disinfectants come in three styles: liquid, spray or

wipes. All have different instructions that have to be followed in order for the disinfection to be effective.

- Do not use concentrated bleach for disinfecting. It is very toxic.
- Do not use any of the surface cleaners on your hands in place of hand sanitizer. They may cause damage to the skin.

Q. Can COVID-19 contaminate food?

COVID-19 is not foodborne. Although it may contaminate surfaces, as discussed, a person will not become sick due to the food consumption.

Some studies have shown that [coronavirus](#) can be stable on the surface of lettuce in laboratory conditions. However, from the long experience with previous outbreaks of coronaviruses, including Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), transmission through food consumption is not likely to occur.

This said, you should always take all the food safety precautions normally used in the kitchen to avoid foodborne illness.

Q: What food safety practices should I use in the kitchen, during the COVID-19 outbreak and at all times?

COVID-19 transmission from food has not been shown. However, consumers always should follow all good hygiene practices and food safety precautions recommended for handling and preparing food in normal times.

Here are simple tips:

- Before preparing, serving or eating food, wash your hands up to the wrists with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before rinsing your hands.
- After drying on a clean towel, refrain from touching your face, mouth or nose.
- Refrigerate foods promptly after arriving from the grocery store.
- Wash all [fresh produce](#), such as lettuce, thoroughly under running water.
- After handling raw meat or egg white or yolk, wash hands with soap and water again.
- Clean cutting surfaces, plates and utensils after handling raw foods and prior to handling any ready-to-eat food.
- Always cook foods to [required temperatures](#) according to the USDA to kill bacteria that leads to foodborne illness
- Refrigerate all leftovers promptly—within two hours, and make sure to reheat leftovers to the minimal recommended temperature of 165F.
- Wash produce under clean running water. Do not use soap to wash it. Wash it before consumption, but if you decide to wash before putting it in the refrigerator, dry it before storing.
- The chances of contaminating your refrigerator with the virus are low; remember, the virus does need to get to your respiratory tract to make you sick.

Q. Grocery shopping: What steps should I take during the COVID-19 outbreak?

The biggest risk of COVID-19 transmission is being around individuals who carry the virus. During the lock down, do not go to the store if you are symptomatic.

When grocery shopping, keep physical distance. The minimal distance recommended to avoid droplet transmission from another person is 6-8

feet.

However, it has been shown that the droplets after someone coughs or sneezes can travel farther than that. Refrain from talking with people.

Tips for grocery shopping:

- Before heading for the store or market, wash hands with soap and water.
- Before entering the store, use hand sanitizer containing a minimum of 60% alcohol.
- Sanitize shopping cart and basket handles before and after use. Grocery stores often have sanitization wipes near the entrance.
- While in the store, maintain physical distance. Avoid aisles with other shoppers.
- Come prepared with a list and spend minimal time shopping.
- Avoid touching produce except for your selections.
- Avoid touching products that you don't need to touch.
- If possible, use the self-check line. Opt to use a card instead of cash. It's a good idea to wipe the card afterward with a sanitizing cloth or wipe.
- Use hand sanitizer after leaving the store.

Upon arriving home:

- Wash your hands before storing food.
- Refrigerate perishable food promptly; don't overload your refrigerator.
- If you buy a large quantity of produce, think about freezing some of it to avoid waste.
- Clean and sanitize food packages, including canned food, drinks and packaged items such as chips and crackers. This can help avoid potential cross-contamination via person-to-person

packaging contact.

- Use or freeze raw meat and poultry before their expiration date to stay safe and reduce waste.

Q: What should I look for in hand sanitizers? Can I make my own?

- Remember that hand sanitizer is only effective if your hands are already visibly clean.
- Only hand sanitizers that contain 60% or more alcohol are effective against coronavirus.
- If making your own hand sanitizer, follow the instructions from credible sources to ensure that the disinfectant is effective.

Q: Takeout food and delivery—What should I be aware of to stay safe?

Currently, no reports have been made that takeout or drive-through food has led to spread of illness.

Takeout minimizes the number of touches by people, especially if the restaurant is practicing social distancing and good preparation practices.

Delivered foods present no risks if the restaurant practices a no-touch/no-interaction policy during preparation. However, independent delivery drivers cannot guarantee low touch and proper physical distancing during deliveries.

Note the following to minimize risk of transmission from packaging or delivery:

- Use measures to reduce the amount of handling of packaging.
- Practice handwashing and use hand sanitizer before and after handling packaging.
- Grocery delivery is a little safer but still presents more risk than

picking up groceries yourself.

- If you use delivery for restaurant food, receive it, unpack it and dispose of the packaging, and then wash your hands. Do not touch your nose, mouth, eyes or face until after this procedure is complete.
- Many restaurants are volunteering information about the measures they take for [food](#) safety. Ask the manager.

More information: Information sheets are available at producesafety.osu.edu/COVID-19

Provided by The Ohio State University

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