

Food Safety FAQs

Is our food supply safe?

The mode of transmission of COVID-19 illness is largely through person-to-person contact, and via respiratory droplets. Information provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) indicates that there is no evidence that food is the likely source or route of transmission of the virus.

However, WHO have issued precautionary advice advising of the need to follow good hygiene practices during food handling and preparation, such as washing hands, cooking meat thoroughly, and avoiding potential cross-contamination between cooked and uncooked foods.

How safe are our employees?

The SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19 is spread mainly through person-to-person contact and respiratory droplets that are produced when a person coughs or sneezes. That is why current health advice recommends social distancing, avoidance of public gatherings, and practising good hand and cough/sneeze hygiene. It is possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes.

Where can we go for guidance about business operations?

Food production, packing, and processing facilities should follow advice and protocols set by the [Australian Government Department of Health](#) and State and Territory health departments. Advice on their websites provides the latest, agreed ways of managing and controlling the spread of the virus at this time.

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How long can the virus survive on a surface?

Currently there is considerable research aimed at improving our understanding of this virus. Much of what we learned about the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) and MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) coronaviruses is assisting our understanding of this new virus. Information published by the [New England Journal of Medicine](#) (17 March 2020), indicate that transmission of SARS-CoV-2 is plausible via aerosols (airborne droplets such as when a person coughs or sneezes) and fomites (objects or materials which are likely to carry infection, such as utensils, cutlery, plates, equipment, etc).

This is because the virus can remain viable and infectious in aerosols for hours and on surfaces up to days (depending on the amount of inoculum present). The length of time it survives on inanimate surfaces will vary depending on factors such as the amount present, temperature, and humidity. This means we need to think very carefully about the frequency and efficiency of our cleaning and sanitation programs.

What should we do if an employee in my facility/farm has tested positive for COVID-19?

If an employee tests positive to COVID-19, the employer must inform fellow employees in that team/shift that they may have been possibly exposed to the virus in the workplace. These employees should be isolated, not return to work, and seek advice from local health authorities. There is also an information line: It is essential that actions are taken to protect workers and people who might have come in contact with the ill employee. In the workplace, businesses should re-double their cleaning and sanitation efforts to control any risks that might be associated with workers who are ill.

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Are there any suggestions for managing work teams?

Keeping a healthy, functioning workforce is essential at this time. Employers need to be proactive and take measures to help protect their workplace from the spread of the virus. Businesses should consider the status of their business continuity plans as well as succession planning should key personnel become sick. Importantly they need to ensure regular communication with all their personnel. If feasible, ensure that all your work teams are kept separate to prevent physical contact. This should apply both during and after work hours. Limiting the spread of the virus requires physical separation and minimising contacts, and if done correctly ensures that teams can be isolated efficiently and your business can keep functioning.

How do I sanitise equipment/surfaces to control SARS-CoV-2 virus

Under Chapter 3 of the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code, food businesses must maintain clean and sanitised facilities and food contact surfaces. This is achieved by using detergents and sanitisers recommended for food manufacturing operations. Unfortunately, there are no lists of approved sanitisers in Australia. However, the United States Environmental Protection Agency publishes a list of sanitisers that meet their criteria for use against SARS-CoV-2. It includes sodium hypochlorite (chlorine-based sanitisers, quaternary ammonium compounds, hydrogen peroxide, and peroxyacetic acid which when used at recommended concentrations and contact times are considered effective against coronaviruses.

Would I need to recall food produced in my facility if an employee tested positive for COVID-19?

Since there is currently no evidence to support the foodborne transmission of COVID-19, it should not be necessary to recall or withdraw of food from the market. But it is wise to check with your regulatory authority. Note that under the Food Standards Code, workers must immediately inform management if they are unwell and they should not attend the workplace when sick.

Recommendations

1.

Practice good personal hygiene, including frequent hand washing & glove changes before & after preparing food.

2.

Where possible physically separate your work teams, practice social distancing where practical, & initiate full clean & sanitisation programs between shifts.

3.

Where possible, abide by recommended social distancing measures.

4.

Limit the potential transmission of COVID-19 through surface contact by washing & sanitising all food contact surfaces & utensils frequently.

5.

Reinforce good hygienic practices.