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Guidance

Guidance for consumers on coronavirus (COVID-19) and food

Updated 25 April 2020

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What you need to know about coronavirus and food

- It is very unlikely that you can catch coronavirus (COVID-19) from food.
- Cooking thoroughly will kill the virus.
- COVID-19 is a respiratory illness. It is not known to be transmitted by exposure to food or food packaging.
- Everyone should [wash their hands](#) regularly with soap and water, for at least 20 seconds, to reduce the risk of illness.
- It is especially important to wash hands before handling food or eating.

Food hygiene when shopping

The risk of coronavirus (COVID-19) cross-contamination to food and food packaging is very low. Food businesses must ensure that they [have the correct food hygiene and food safety processes in place](#) and that these are being followed to protect their customers.

Staff handling food in shops are required to maintain a high degree of personal cleanliness and wear suitable, clean clothing. This includes regular hand washing to maintain good hygiene.

Food businesses are required to have a [system for managing food safety](#) in place, but this does not necessarily require staff to wear gloves when serving or handling food.

When you are buying loose foods such as fruit, vegetables, or bread in a bakery, try and only touch what you are going to buy.

Imported food products

The risk of imported food and packaging from affected countries being contaminated with coronavirus is very unlikely. This is because the law requires the exporter to follow the right controls during the packing and shipping process to ensure good hygiene is met.

Reusable cups

Customers may previously have used reusable cups or containers when shopping or buying drinks at cafes and other retailers. It is up to the individual business to decide whether they allow the use of reusable cups or containers during this period.

If reusable cups or containers are used, they should be washed thoroughly in hot, soapy water, or in a dishwasher, if suitable.

Social distancing when shopping

You should maintain a 2 metre distance between yourself and others, and only buy what you need. This is to avoid crowding and to create adequate spacing between other shoppers and staff.

Shops and supermarkets may take their own [action to avoid crowding](#). This can include monitoring the number of customers within the store and limiting access to avoid congestion. They may also implement queue management systems to limit crowds gathering at entrances and to maintain the 2 metre distance.

Further information on [social distancing](#) can be found on GOV.UK.

Food hygiene at home

Although it is very unlikely that coronavirus is transmitted through food, cooking thoroughly will kill the virus.

If you have symptoms associated with coronavirus, or have tested positive for COVID-19, you can minimise direct hand contact with food by using tongs and utensils.

It is important that anyone handling and preparing food for others follows the Food Standard Agency's [guidance on food safety and hygiene](#).

You should always use a food-safe disinfectant when cleaning surfaces and follow the instructions on the pack. If there is a shortage of suitable cleaning products, you can use hot, soapy water to clean these surfaces.

Food packaging

If you have been shopping, there should be no need to sanitise the outer packaging of food. This is because food businesses are required to have a [system for managing food safety](#) in place, which should include keeping packaging clean. You should still follow good hygiene practice by washing your hands after handling any outer packaging. If you have

reason to believe the packaging has been contaminated, you should follow the recommended [cleaning guidance](#).

Loose food

It is very unlikely that you can catch coronavirus from food. You should follow good hygiene and preparation practices when handling and eating raw fruit, leafy salads and vegetables. This includes washing fresh produce to help to remove any contamination on the surface. Peeling the outer layers or skins of certain fruits and vegetables can also help to remove surface contamination. We would remind you not to wash raw chicken or other meat as this can lead to cross-contamination in your kitchen.

It is important to [wash your hands](#) with soap and water, for at least 20 seconds before and after you prepare food.

Food storage and reuse at home

[‘Best before’ and ‘use-by’ dates](#) should be used to make sure your food is safe and that you avoid food waste by not throwing away edible food unnecessarily. You should always follow the manufacturer’s instruction on the packaging.

- ‘Best before’ is about quality: food is still safe to be eaten after this date but may no longer be at its best.
- ‘Use-by’ is about safety: food should not be eaten, cooked or frozen after this date, as it could be unsafe – even if it has been stored correctly and looks and smells fine.

If your food is safe to freeze, it can be frozen right up to and including the ‘use-by’ date. Freezing acts as a ‘pause button’ and stops bacterial growth. You can freeze most food items, including raw and cooked meats, fruit and eggs.

When food defrosts, its core temperature rises. This provides the ideal conditions for bacteria to grow if left at room temperature. It is best to defrost food slowly and safely in the fridge. Food should be eaten within 24 hours once defrosted.

Takeaway food

Where possible you should place your order by telephone, app or online and get a designated time for collection.

If you are collecting your food in person from a takeaway or restaurant which offers a pick-up service, you should adhere to the [social distancing rules set out by the food business](#). This may include having staggered collection times and using a queue management system to maintain the 2 metre separation.

It is safe to have takeaway food delivered if the business you order from follows the Government’s safety guidance.

Staff preparing your food should regularly wash their hands and maintain good hygiene practices in food preparation and handling areas.

[Government advice on social distancing](#) applies to those delivering food. You should minimise the chance of coronavirus spreading by maintaining a distance of 2 metres when the food is delivered.

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