Food businesses

Information for grocery stores, restaurants and other food premises for employers and workers.

Update May 8, 2020: As part of phase 2 of BC’s Restart Plan, restaurants, cafes, and pubs are planning to begin re-opening in mid-May with sufficient distancing measures.

The advice below is based on current recommendations and may change. The most up-to-date information is provided in daily briefings by the PHO and Minister of Health. Please reference materials and recent news updates:

- Guidance to Retail Food and Grocery Stores (April 25, 2020)
  this guidance document interprets the PHO orders for retail food and grocery stores
- Further information, details and answers to common questions with respect to the guidance document can be found in the PDF of information on this page. this PDF will highlight changes in guidance practice as the COVID outbreak evolves
- List of essential services
- PHO orders (Orders must be followed in a Provincial State of Emergency)
- UPDATED WorkSafeBC COVID-19 and returning to safe operation - Phase 2. Operational guidance for worker and worksite safety

For businesses

UPDATED: Will appear before items that have been updated

Spread of COVID-19 in the workplace

Can it be transmitted through food imported from other countries?

Although COVID-19 can remain on surfaces for hours to days, it is very unlikely that the virus will survive after the length of time required for most shipping and distribution. There has been no evidence of COVID-19 being transmitted through food imported from any country, including those affected by COVID-19.

Does cooking kill COVID-19?

Cooking foods to an internal temperature of at least 74°C will inactivate COVID-19 and other bacteria in food. Always use a thermometer to check that the internal temperature of the food has reached 74°C. Following time and temperature tables for inactivating Salmonella in meat is also sufficient to inactivate COVID-19.

Are foods prepared in grocery stores, such as rotisserie chickens, allowed?

Foods that are prepared in retail stores that are individually packaged for customers are allowed. Cooking foods will inactivate COVID-19. These foods must only be handled by employees who are following established food handling procedures. Please see above for more information on cooking and food safety.
Can it be passed through handling money?

There is no evidence that COVID-19 can be passed on through touching or handling money. COVID-19 is spread person-to-person through respiratory droplets. Although COVID-19 can remain on surfaces like paper money and coins, it will eventually die off. Customers and employees must use appropriate hand washing or sanitizers throughout the day, and always before eating, after using the washroom, and before they touch their eyes, nose, and mouth (see Hand Hygiene poster). We also recommend:

- Employees who handle money must wash their hands with soap and water before preparing food.
- Dedicate employees (cashiers) to handle money and credit cards so they are segregated from preparing foods.
- Cashiers who handle money, including credit cards, must wash their hands frequently and be reminded to not touch their face.
- Gloves are an option to limit hand contact however they should be changed frequently.
- Where possible use point of sale (POS) devices that do not require customers to touch them.
- Frequently clean and disinfect POS devices.

Can it be passed through handling credit cards or loyalty cards? Or through touching grocery carts or payment screens?

COVID-19 is mainly spread from person-to-person through respiratory droplets. Since it is possible the COVID-19 virus may remain on surfaces from hours to days, some spread through this route may also be occurring. Customers and employees are encouraged to use appropriate hand washing or sanitizers throughout the day, and always before eating, after using the washroom, when they arrive to work, when they arrive home and before they touch their eyes, nose, and mouth (see Hand Hygiene poster). In retail grocery stores and take-away premises customers and employees will be touching many surfaces in the store that may also have been touched by others. The use of alcohol based hand rubs and alcohol based wipes in these environments will help to remove COVID-19 from frequently touched surfaces. Stores are also asked to post signs reminding customers to wash their hands and use hand sanitizer.

Increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfection of high touch surfaces to at least twice daily or more if possible. This applies to these frequently touched items:

- Point of sale devices. We also recommend employees (cashiers) limit direct handling of credit cards and loyalty cards where possible and allow customers to scan them.
- Self-service scanning areas and payment touch screens.
- Handles of grocery store baskets and carts.
- Doors, railings, and common counter areas.

Can it be passed through handling take-away containers?

COVID-19 is mainly spread person-to-person through respiratory droplets. Since it is possible the COVID-19 virus may remain on surfaces from hours to days, some spread through this route may also be occurring. Employees, delivery drivers or other persons who are ill must not be involved in handling take-away containers. Practicing good hygiene through regular hand washing and sanitizers will minimize the risk with handling or touching take-away containers.

Should we continue to sell bulk items?

For bulk items (e.g., muffins, baking supplies, or candy) that customers can dispense themselves, including self-service beverage stations (soda, coffee, slushies):
No, you should not sell bulk items, with some exceptions. While there is no documented spread of COVID-19 through food, there is a theoretical risk that a person infected with COVID-19 could spread the virus by sneezing on food or by directly touching food with their hands. To limit hand-contact of customers to foods that are served in bulk:

- Staff are permitted to dispense bulk items from behind counters (e.g., fish counters, bakery counters).
- **All bins** that allow customers to access foods directly (e.g., muffins or bulk raisins) must be **discontinued**. Prepackaged servings are acceptable.
- Customer self-service beverage stations must be **discontinued**. Remove all beverage containers from customer service areas to behind the counter and shut-down all self-service beverage dispersers.
- Staff are permitted to pour soda, coffee and other beverages for customers. Consider switching or substituting pre-packaged (canned or bottled) beverages.

**Is bulk water from coolers in grocery stores allowed?**

**Bottled water dispensing sites in the community.**
At drive-up or stand-alone dispensing sites, self-service is allowed if the following requirements are observed:

1. Where the site is unstaffed the operator of these water bottling sites must provide enhanced cleaning and sanitizing of high touch surfaces and dispensing equipment at least twice per day, with higher frequency desirable.
2. Physical barriers must allow only one customer at a time.
3. Signage must be available to describe requirements for physical distancing during water bottling and indicate that hygienic practices are required during dispensing of water at these sites. Users of these services should be reminded to practice hand washing before and after dispensing water.

**Bottled water dispensing sites in grocery stores.**

1. Staff must not fill a customer’s returned container, customers should fill their own containers.
2. Signage must be available to describe requirements for physical distancing during water bottling and indicate that hygienic practices are required during dispensing of water at these sites.
3. Hand sanitizer and/or disinfectants wipes and a refuse container must be available for customers. Customers must be advised to use hand sanitizer and/or disinfectant wipes prior to dispensing water.
4. High touch surfaces on the water filling machine are disinfected as frequently as specified in the store’s enhanced sanitation program.
5. If store management has written approval from the local EHO bottle exteriors may be disinfected onsite prior to refilling for the same customer that brought them in.

**Should customers bring their own containers for take-away food or bulk items? What about reusable grocery bags?**

COVID-19 is mainly spread from person-to-person through respiratory droplets. Although the COVID-19 virus may remain on surfaces from hours to days, this risk of spread is probably lower. Requirements include:

- Increased cleaning and sanitizing at high touch areas where bulk foods are dispensed (see above).
• Premises must provide single use containers for take-away foods. Customers must not use their own containers for take-away food.

Reusable grocery bags

• Employees (cashiers) packaging foods may choose not to handle customer reusable grocery bags. Stores may have a policy prohibiting use of reusable bags. BCCDC and the health authorities respect the right of retail stores to make policy that works for them and their employees.

• If reusable bags are accepted at a retail store then customers may be asked to pack the bags themselves. If employees handle or pack groceries into reusable bags they are expected to practice frequent hand washing as described. Hand hygiene. Employees are reminded that gloves are not a replacement for good and frequent hand washing and hand sanitizing.
Physical Distancing

Physical distancing: Implement physical distancing to reduce opportunities for interactions among large groups that would have prolonged close contact. Practically this might mean limiting the number of patrons who enter your business and discontinuing service in areas where physical distancing cannot be practiced (for e.g., counter service). Poster

At grocery stores
Premises must limit the number of customers entering the store and advise customers in line to maintain physical distancing. When customers are waiting in line at the check-out they must stay 2 metres away from each other. In a practical sense, this would mean an equivalent of two arms length or one large shopping cart. Enhance your premise’s sanitation plan and schedule, and ensure staff are practicing proper hygiene (e.g., frequent hand washing, as well as coughing or sneezing into your elbow rather than hands).

How can kitchen workers apply physical distancing requirements in small kitchens?
Physical distancing in busy work environments, such as kitchens may be difficult. The goal in the kitchen, as with any work-site environment, is to increase space between kitchen staff during meal preparations, and with customers during take-out and delivery services. Operators in food premises are asked to identify how this could best work in their kitchen. Physical distancing Poster
Options that meet this requirement include:
- Staggering activities in time to limit the number of staff in a confined area during the same period.
- Moving activities to another room wherever possible. Separating duties into unused dining areas could be an option for some preparation and packaging.
- Altering shift times to minimize the number of staff working in close quarters
- Using markings or dividers in the kitchen to ensure physical distancing

How do I keep safe when making deliveries of groceries or other essential items?
Volunteers and people engaged in food delivery activities must practice physical distancing and hand-washing. Contact clients before leaving the groceries or items at the door to confirm they are available to take receipt. When the item is left at the door, knock, ring or alert the client, then step back 2 metres. If required, establish a knock, drop, and go policy with the client. Alcohol hand rubs can be used to clean and disinfect hands after handling items and after touching door bells, etc.

To reduce risk among customers
- If lining up is necessary, ensure that patrons maintain social distancing (require 2 metres space between patrons)
- Ensure service areas are properly cleaned and sanitized according to the product manufacturer’s instructions after each customer service, staff shift changes, and before and after closing.
- Do not provide self-serve food to patrons; have your staff serve all foods and hand out tableware or utensils to customers.
• Have separate cleaning and sanitizing equipment for customer and kitchen areas.
• Have dedicated staff for cleaning and sanitizing the service area.
• Regularly clean and disinfect equipment for handling payments.
• Provide alcohol-based hand rubs in the food premise for patrons.
• Ensure washrooms are well stocked with liquid soap and paper towels at all times, and that warm running water is available.
• Place hand hygiene and cough and sneeze etiquette signs within areas in the food premise (for example, use this Hand Hygiene poster).
• Place signage on front doors that tell guests not to enter the premises if they are feeling ill. It is recommended that they use a self-assessment tool and follow the guidelines in the tool.  
https://covid19.thrive.health/
• Encourage your patrons to use delivery or take-out options to encourage customers to avoid lining up onsite or picking up meals in person.
Sanitation

Should we review our sanitation program?
We recommend that food operators review their sanitation procedures and increase their sanitation frequency, especially for high touch surfaces and public areas.

Surfaces must be cleaned on a regular basis with an approved detergent. Cleaning removes the physical contaminants that are on a surface. This is followed by rinsing with clean, potable water. Cleaned surfaces must then be sanitized (food contact surfaces) or disinfected (non food contact surfaces). Review with your staff how to use and verify the concentration of sanitizers and disinfectants used in your food premises.

Are sanitizers different from disinfectants?
Food grade sanitizers are used after cleaning to reduce the level of bacteria to a safe level when following the manufacturer’s instruction for concentration and contact time. Sanitizers are used on food contact surfaces. When sanitizers are used at the no-rinse concentration level it does not need to be rinsed off with clean potable water.

Disinfectants are different from sanitizers in that they have a greater ability to destroy bacteria, viruses and molds. Disinfectants are used at a higher concentration and require a longer contact time than sanitizers. If a food grade disinfectant is used on a food contact surface, it may need to be rinsed off with potable water.

Caution: Operators must confirm with their chemical suppliers to ensure that sanitizers or disinfectants are appropriate for use against COVID-19, and for food premises use.

What do I need to know about disinfectants?
In Canada, disinfectants must have a DIN (drug identification number). Some disinfectant/sanitizer products are the same chemical. It can be used as a disinfectant when used at a higher concentration and longer contact time or as a sanitizer when used at a lower concentration and shorter contact time. For example, “bleach” is considered a disinfectant when used at 1000 to 5000 ppm with a 10 minute contact time, but is considered a sanitizer when used at 100 to 200 ppm with a 2 minute contact time. To prepare a bleach solution consult the FOODSAFE online bleach calculator.

CAUTION: Always ensure that the disinfectant you use is approved for use in a food processing or food service application. Some disinfectants can be toxic and are unsuitable for food premises or food contact surfaces:
- Canadian Drug and Health Products list of registered Sanitizers and Disinfectants.
- Disinfectants for Use Against SARS-CoV-2 | US EPA (List N)
- Infection Control information on BCCDC

How do I clean surfaces, linens, or clothing to reduce risk?
We recommend all food contact surfaces, such as food prep tables, kitchen, and packaging areas are cleaned and sanitized on a regular frequency. They do not need to be disinfected.
Customer service areas, dining rooms, or other areas in the restaurant or premises that are exposed frequently to the public should also be regularly cleaned and sanitized. The areas that do not have direct contact with food could also be disinfected. This is important for surfaces that are touched frequently, for example dining room tables, chairs, door knobs, or menus. It would be appropriate to disinfect any area that could be frequently touched or exposed to coughing or sneezing, for example hand-held POS (point of sale) devices or bathroom areas.

- For porous surfaces such as carpeted floor, rugs, and drapes, remove visible contamination and clean with appropriate cleaners indicated for use on these surfaces. After cleaning:
  - If the items can be laundered, launder items in accordance with the manufacturer’s instructions using the warmest appropriate water setting for the items and then dry items completely.
  - Otherwise, use products suitable for porous surfaces.

**Linens, clothing, and other items that go in the laundry**

- Do not shake dirty laundry to minimize dispersing soils and particles through the air.
- Wash items as appropriate in accordance with the manufacturer’s instructions. If possible, launder items using the warmest appropriate water setting for the items and dry items completely. Dirty laundry that has been in contact with an ill person can be washed with other people’s items.
- Clean and disinfect hampers or other carts for transporting laundry according to guidance above for hard or soft surfaces.

**Should we perform any special cleaning and what agents should be used?**

Maintaining a food safety program according to the Food Safety Act and Food Premises Regulation is vital to maintaining a hygienic and safe food business. COVID-19 is susceptible to sanitizers and disinfectants.

- Increase cleaning and disinfection frequency of high-touch surfaces and high traffic areas to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 (see above).
- Increase cleaning and sanitizing frequency of food contact surfaces.

**Employee break areas**

COVID-19 is spread from person-to-person through respiratory droplets. Recent information about the spread of COVID-19 among food handlers and crew members of cruise ships is consistent with employees acquiring COVID-19 through close contact in shared employee break areas and living areas. To minimize the spread in common break areas requirements are that:

- Employees practice social distancing during break times. If possible, stagger the times employees take breaks in common areas.
- Perform more frequent cleaning and disinfecting of shared areas.
Managing ill employees

Employer Information

- Employees that arrive at work or call in sick with respiratory symptoms must be told not to come to work and to practice self-isolation. Refer them to Self-Isolation guidance and symptom assessment guidance BC COVID-19. Further information can be found on the BCCDC website.
- If an employee has a COVID-19 positive diagnosis, the local public health department will identify any co-workers or clients who may have been exposed to the sick employee.
- The employer and employees should be reassured that if they haven’t been contacted by public health then there is no issue or concern that was identified by public health.
- Your premises are not required to close following notification of an ill food worker. However, enhanced cleaning and sanitizing may be advised as described below.
- All food premises must have an updated employee illness policy that is communicated with all staff immediately.

Enhanced cleaning

Your premises are likely already following an enhanced cleaning and disinfection regimen. Further cleaning and sanitation of food handling areas where the ill employee worked and cleaning and disinfection of high touch areas is highly recommended. These spaces include the following:

- Employee break areas
- Employee washrooms
- Employee change-rooms
- Door handles, light switches
- Equipment handled by the employee

Further information on cleaning in food businesses may be found under the sanitation section of this Food businesses page.

Employee information

- Employees who start displaying symptoms should use the BC COVID-19 self-assessment tool. Employees must follow the operational policy for their workplace including advising the employer of illness.
- Employees that voluntarily self-isolate due to illness can return to work after 10 days when all symptoms have resolved. A residual cough may persist, but you can be cleared to return to work if all other symptoms have resolved.
- Employees with a positive diagnosis for COVID-19 will be contacted and followed-up by public health.

Should my employees get tested for COVID-19?

People who do not have symptoms of COVID-19 do not need to be tested. Symptoms of COVID-19 include coughing, sneezing, sore throat, fever, and difficulty breathing. If an employee has been exposed to COVID-19 but is currently asymptomatic (not showing any signs of illness), they do not need to be tested.
Should my employees get tested for COVID-19?

As of March 12, anyone returning from international travel must self-isolate for 14 days (2 weeks) before returning to work. They do not need to be tested for COVID-19 before returning to work.

Encourage employees to self-monitor for symptoms of respiratory illness including a cough, sneeze, fever, sore throat or difficulty breathing. Tell your employees that if they are sick they must remain at home. Advise them to use the COVID-19 self-assessment tool to know when to seek healthcare. COVID-19 self-assessment tool

For food service workers

Reduce your risk of contracting COVID-19

- Ensure appropriate hand hygiene.
- Hand washing is essential to help you keep healthy, and reduces the risk of spreading microorganisms (germs) to others.
- You can pick up germs from the air when people who are sick cough or sneeze, or from surfaces where germs reside. If germs land on your hands and you touch your mouth, eyes, nose, these germs can enter your body and cause an infection.
- For food service workers directly involved in food production, we recommend appropriate hand washing with plain soap and water. Do not use alcohol based hand sanitizers.
- For workers who are not involved in food production, like cashiers and servers, we recommend appropriate hand washing with soap and water, hand sanitizer is also allowable.
- Hand washing poster for your workplace
Should we be wearing a mask at work?
No. Masks provide a protective barrier to reduce the risk of spreading viruses through droplets made by people when they cough or sneeze. Masks are not needed for people who are not experiencing any symptoms such as cough, sneeze, fever or shortness of breath. Another reason masks are not recommended are that they may cause you to touch your face more often.

Should we be using disposable gloves?
Frequent and proper handwashing is always encouraged as it is the best way of preventing all respiratory virus infections and other foodborne illnesses. If a food premises chooses to use gloves, employees must wash their hands thoroughly before putting on the gloves and change them regularly. Change the gloves before you handle money or credit card machines, and afterward. Wearing gloves does not reduce the need for hand washing. Even while wearing gloves, employees must avoid touching the face.

Other resources
- Farmers markets
- Food banks
- Food safety for the public

Related links
- Farmers' markets
- Food banks
- Food safety
- FOODSAFE Bleach Calculator
- FAQ for Food Industry (Cornell University)
- WorkSafeBC Resources COVID-19 support to workers and employers
- World Health Organization food safety for food businesses COVID-19 and Food Safety: Guidance for Food Businesses

List of updates (2020):
May 29: Addition of WorkSafe links, removed restaurant restrictions
May 8: Update plan announcement
Apr 29: Bottled water
Apr 27: COVID-19 Guidance to Retail and Grocery Stores (link to Ministry of Health document)
Apr 15: Bottled water; managing ill employees; list of links
Mar 30: Credit cards; Bulk items; Reusable bags and containers
Mar 27: PDF introduced