



COVID-19 Food Safety

Revised May 29, 2020

The Maryland Department of Health (MDH) is committed to ensuring the safety and availability of Maryland’s food supply during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) public health emergency. This interim guidance highlights actions taken at the federal and State levels to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 as it relates to food service facilities and the food supply. Per Governor Hogan’s [Executive Order 20-05-27-01](#) - effective May 29th, 2020 - restaurants and bars may only operate if they have outdoor seating or carry-out, delivery, or drive-thru services.

MDH understands that many Marylanders will be either cooking at home more, ordering food online through meal delivery services, or picking up carry-out meals from their favorite local food businesses. When preparing, ordering, or receiving food, always remember to follow the [4 Steps to Food Safety](#) - clean, separate, cook, and chill – to prevent foodborne illness.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reports that, “Currently there is no evidence of food or food packaging being associated with transmission of COVID-19.” Please visit the FDA [website](#) for the FAQ document “Food Safety and the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).”

Currently there are no reported food shortages and no disruptions in food supply have been noted. There are reports of limited supplies of other household items, however those are being restocked.

MDH is aware that Maryland residents have questions about food, food safety, and the COVID-19 illness as related to food. Please find below a list of questions that we have been receiving and some answers to those questions. Businesses should also see the FAQs available on the Business Express website, <https://businessexpress.maryland.gov/coronavirus>, and the Maryland Back to Business website, <https://open.maryland.gov/backtobusiness/>, for more information.

Additionally, if you have a specific food safety question that is not answered below, or you cannot find the answer on any of the following links, please call 410-767-8401 and the Office of Food Protection staff will work to provide you an answer.

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Employee Illness

What should I do if a restaurant that I have used has a worker who has contracted coronavirus?

Restaurants have been directed to keep ill employees from working, so the chances of having a sick worker in restaurants is very low. Foodborne exposure to COVID-19 is not currently thought to be a route of transmission, but patrons should still wash their hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water before and after meals. Restaurants have also been directed to make sure people are spaced apart when picking up food.

What steps should a food establishment take if one or more of their employees is diagnosed with COVID-19?

Food establishments and other businesses should review the [CDC's interim guidance for businesses and employers](#) and the information on [Maryland's Business Express](#) website for planning and responding to coronavirus disease.

All food establishments should have clear policies on illness and COVID-19. No employee or manager should work if ill. Employees and managers should check themselves for symptoms of COVID-19 (fever, cough, shortness of breath, chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, and new loss of taste or smell). All employees should notify their supervisor and stay home if they are sick.

I have a critical infrastructure business and one of my employees may have been exposed to COVID-19. What should I do?

Effective April 8, 2020, CDC has issued new guidance for the management of critical infrastructure workers who may have been exposed to COVID-19. The new guidance allows critical infrastructure workers to continue working after a potential exposure to COVID-19, provided they remain asymptomatic and additional precautions are implemented to protect them and the community. Please see the following guidance for more information:

https://phpa.health.maryland.gov/Documents/Crit_Infrast_Workers%20Guid_04122020.pdf

What should I do if an employee tests positive at a food processing plant for COVID-19 and how can I get guidance on continuing to operate and general best practices/guidelines for dealing with COVID-19 in the workplace?

Employee tested positive for COVID-19

There is no requirement to close a food processing plant in the event an employee tests positive for COVID-19. Please see the FDA guidance: [What to Do if You Have COVID-19 Confirmed Positive or Exposed Workers](#) and CDC guidance: [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) - Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers](#) for more information. If the plant is a meat/poultry processing facility, see CDC guidance: [Guidance for Meat and Poultry Processing](#)

[Workers and Employers.](#)

Employee Potentially Exposed

Some critical infrastructure employees (such as food workers) may continue working if he/she has potentially been exposed: [Updated Interim Guidance For Employers And Businesses On Management Of Critical Infrastructure Workers With Possible Exposure To Covid-19.](#)

Additional Business Resources

The state of Maryland also has COVID-19 resources for businesses: [Maryland Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Information for Business](#)

Cleaning and Sanitizing

What kind of cleaning should businesses do?

The CDC is encouraging routine environmental cleaning for businesses. [Click here for more guidance and information.](#) Additional sanitation steps are not recommended in the event of an employee that appears ill. The CDC provides general cleaning and disinfection guidelines [here](#). The FDA has emphasized the need to maintain clean and sanitized facilities, including food contact surfaces, and food facilities may want to consider a more frequent cleaning schedule.

[Products with EPA-approved emerging viral pathogens claims](#) are expected to be effective against COVID-19 based on data for harder to kill viruses. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for all cleaning and disinfection products (e.g., concentration, application method and contact time, etc.). **Check the product label guidelines for if and where these disinfectant products are safe and recommended for use in food manufacturing areas or food establishments.**

When preparing food in your home or business, are there additional practices needed to ensure the spread of the virus is minimized?

Use this opportunity to practice food safety by frequent cleaning of food contact and non-food contact surfaces and proper handwashing.

- Continue to regularly clean and sanitize any objects or surfaces that are frequently touched by workers or household members.
- Follow safe food handling practices, keep food items cold or hot as required, and include frequent hand washing with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds.
- Keep food preparation stations at least 6 feet apart.

Food Supply and Food Safety

What is the recommendation for salad bars and buffets?

Restaurants and bars that do not have outdoor seating, carryout, drive-thru or delivery services are closed per Governor Hogan's Executive Order. Restaurants, bars, and social clubs with outdoor seating are not permitted to serve food in a buffet format. The mandatory closure will be enforced by local police, State police, and possibly the National Guard.

<https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Executive-Order-Amending-Large-Gatherings.pdf>.

MDH's Office of Food Protection encourages critical infrastructure stores (grocery, supermarkets, etc.) that remain open to voluntarily close salad bars, self-service food bars and buffets. Facilities with self-service areas (such as coffee stations) should incorporate enhanced cleaning protocols, limit the number of customers with access, and provide customers with napkins or other barriers when touching carafes, condiments, milk cartons, etc. to align with the intent of the executive order.

What if I want to modify my existing wholesale food business into a business serving the general public (retail food sales)?

Businesses will need to make the following arrangements:

1. The firm must notify the local health department to inquire if it will need a food service facility license to do this type of operation on a temporary basis;
2. Customers may order food via phone or from a website online;
3. Orders must be packed and staged in a refrigerated facility or trailer at the distribution center that is accessible only by firm employees;
4. Customers will pick up orders in a drive-thru fashion, and workers will pull orders from the refrigerated facility or refrigerated trailer;
5. Precautions must be taken by workers to minimize contact with the public; and
6. Customers shall not be allowed entry into the warehouse or to congregate while waiting for orders to be filled.

Should retail food businesses and delivery drivers be wearing gloves and masks?

Effective 7:00 a.m. April 18, 2020, per Governor Hogan's [Executive Order 20-04-15](#), all staff of retail establishments shall wear a face covering while working in areas open to the general public and areas in which interactions with other staff are likely; and all foodservice establishments shall require staff who interact with customers (including, without limitation, delivery personnel) to wear, and those staff shall wear, face coverings while working. The CDC has provided detailed instructions on how to construct cloth [face masks](#) out of commonly available items. In addition, the FDA has published guidance on [Best Practices for Retail Food Stores, Restaurants, and Food Pick-Up/Delivery Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). Glove use is only required for food handlers to prevent bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat foods.

Do staff in Foodservice Establishments have to wear face coverings in the rear cooking and preparation areas of a restaurant if not interacting with customers?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advise the use of simple cloth face coverings to slow the spread of the virus and to help people who are unaware they have the virus from spreading it to others.

If an Authorized Health Official determines that a business, organization, establishment, facility, or construction site in his/her political subdivision (an “Unsafe Facility”) is unable or unwilling to operate in a manner that does not pose an unreasonable risk of exacerbating the spread of COVID-19 (including, without limitation, as a result of non-compliance with Social Distancing Guidance), a local health department may require the Unsafe Facility to modify its operations to comply with Social Distancing Guidance. This could include face coverings even where there is no interaction with the public.

In the event the face covering causes a safety or health issue, the foodservice establishment may implement alternative measures that could include heightened physical distancing procedures that eliminate interactions with other employees.

For more information on mask use, please see the CDC’s guidance on face coverings: [Use Cloth Face Coverings to Help Slow Spread](#). The Maryland [Business Express](#) website has additional information for businesses.

Can mobile food trucks continue to operate?

The Governor’s executive order does not require closure of food trucks. However, food truck operators must be careful to avoid clustering multiple food trucks together, provide instructions for social distancing for their customers, reduce the opportunity for gatherings of more than 10 people, and prevent crowds. Example signs and additional resources may be found [here](#).

Can Cottage Foods businesses operate during COVID?

The Maryland Department of Health can only respond to COVID-19 questions regarding food safety. For interpretation of whether the Governor’s orders or interpretive memos apply to your particular business, please refer to the Maryland COVID-19 Business Express website: <https://govstatus.egov.com/md-coronavirus-business>

If you have other questions pertaining to essential or non-essential businesses, please email psector@maryland.gov, which is monitored by the Maryland Emergency Management team.

Are Farmers Markets allowed to continue to operate?

Farmers markets are considered essential and are allowed to operate. Guidance and requirements for the safe operation of farmers markets can be found on the Maryland Department of Agriculture website: <https://news.maryland.gov/mda/category/covid-19/>

Outdoor Dining

What do restaurants, bars, and social clubs need to do to be able to serve customers outdoors?

Restaurants, bars, and social clubs (including American Legion posts, VFW posts, and Elks Clubs) with dining facilities are required to comply with the Governor's [Executive Order 20-05-27-01](#), as well as any additional requirements established by the local government authorities and any other applicable laws. [Guidance and best practices](#) are also available to assist restaurants with safely resuming outdoor operations.

Restaurants and Bars and Social Clubs that serve food and beverages to customers in outdoor areas shall:

1. require all staff to wear Face Coverings, in accordance with the Face Coverings Order;
2. ensure patrons are seated at least six feet away from each other, except for households seated together;
3. not allow groups larger than six persons to be seated together, except members of the same household;
4. not serve food in a buffet format; and
5. clean and disinfect each table between each seating in accordance with CDC and MDH guidelines, using cleaning products that meet the criteria of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for use against COVID-19.

Are restaurants limited in the capacity of their outdoor seating?

Restaurants must still adhere to the [Executive Order 20-05-27-01](#) requiring social distancing by keeping patrons (not just tables) at least 6 feet apart, except for households seated together. No more than 6 people may be seated together, except members of the same household.

Can customers still use indoor restrooms?

Yes, customers who are seated outside may still use indoor restrooms. The facility should implement procedures (including floor markings and signage) to ensure that customers do not congregate around the restrooms. Restrooms should be cleaned frequently, and soap and water, hand sanitizer, and disposable hand towels should be provided. For more information, see the [Guidance and Best Practices for Restaurants](#).

What counts as “indoor” versus “outdoor”? Can tents be used? What about buildings with large garage doors that can be opened?

Overhead tents, canopies, and coverings may be used so long as they do not constitute an “indoor area,” as defined in [COMAR 10.19.04.02B\(9\)](#):

“Indoor area” means all space in a structure or building with a ceiling that is enclosed on all sides by any combination of permanent or temporary walls, windows, or doorways,

whether open or closed, or other physical barriers extending from floor to the ceiling.

Can the street outside a restaurant be closed to provide more outdoor seating area?

Contact your local department of public works and/or local law enforcement to inquire about road closures. Do not set up outdoor seating on any public space (including parks, public parking spaces, roads, or sidewalks) without the express permission of your local government authorities.

Can restaurants open buffets?

No, per the Governor's [Executive Order 20-05-27-01](#), restaurants, bars, and social clubs may not serve food in a buffet format.

My restaurant did not previously have outdoor seating. Can I add outdoor seating now?

The Governor's [Executive Order 20-05-27-01](#) does not prohibit restaurants, bars, and social clubs from adding new outdoor seating. If you are adding outdoor seating, check with your [local health department](#) and other local authorities first to ensure compliance with all requirements, including any applicable licenses or permits. Local jurisdictions may expand opportunities for outdoor dining by allowing for the closing of streets and expanding into parking lots and public outdoor spaces.

Can physical barriers be used between tables instead of keeping them 6 feet apart?

Patrons must be seated at least 6 feet away from each other, except for households seated together, regardless of the use of physical barriers.

How should restaurants, bars, and social clubs screen employees?

Restaurants, bars, and social clubs should follow [CDC guidelines](#) for screening employees. In addition, the following questions may be asked when an employee reports to work:

- Have you had ANY of the following symptoms of COVID-19 infection in the last 14 days:
 - Fever or chills; Cough, shortness of breath, or difficulty breathing; Fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, or diarrhea; New loss of taste or smell
- Is there anyone in your immediate household with COVID-19 infection or have you had close contact (less than 6 feet for at least 15 minutes) with anyone with COVID-19 infection in the past seven 14 (fourteen) days, without the use of personal protective equipment?
- Have you had a positive test for COVID-19 infection within the past ten (10) days? [If yes, employee may need to provide additional medical documentation to work.]

Temperature checks are not required, but employees should be encouraged to self-monitor for symptoms of COVID-19, including daily temperature checks before going to work.

Are restaurants required to use disposable utensils and servingware?

This is not a requirement in the Executive Order. The Department recommends that when possible, employees should place the table settings after the party is seated and wear gloves when removing food service items and wash their hands immediately afterwards. Restaurants, bars, and social clubs should limit multi-use items, especially if they are difficult to clean and sanitize between use. Provide condiments in either single use containers or disinfected manufacturer packaging, and use menu boards, disposable menus, or mobile apps for ordering. If a facility uses reusable menus, they should be cleaned and sanitized between each customer's use.

Resources:

- Visit the FDA's website for more information and FAQs for food products:
 - [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) Frequently Asked Questions](#)
 - [Food Safety and the Coronavirus Disease 2019](#)
 - [Retail Food Protection: Employee Health and Personal Hygiene Handbook](#)
- Additional information for retail food establishments, including a fact sheet in English and Spanish, can be found on the National Restaurant Association's website:
 - [Coronavirus Information and Resources](#)
- Guidance from CDC for businesses:
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/businesses-employers.html>
- Guidance from WHO for businesses:
 - <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf>
- Additional information for businesses on planning for and responding to coronavirus disease is available on Maryland's Business Express website:
 - <https://businessexpress.maryland.gov/coronavirus>
- Resources for businesses, including example signage:
 - <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://coronavirus.maryland.gov/pages/business-resources&sa=D&ust=1590704468214000&usg=AFQjCNG9xdZT5cKNJpilKztMFWR77kir2A>
- Maryland Back to Business (guidance and best practices)
 - <https://open.maryland.gov/backtobusiness/>