



Food safety and COVID-19

Practices and principles for food businesses to reduce the risk of COVID-19 impacts in their workplace

There is currently no evidence that COVID-19 is transmitted through food or prepared food products. COVID-19 is a respiratory illness, not a foodborne illness. The likelihood of an infected person contaminating commercial goods is low as is the risk of catching COVID-19 from food packaging that has been moved, travelled and exposed to different conditions and temperature. Additional information on COVID-19 and Food Safety can be found on the [Food Standards Australia & New Zealand \(FSANZ\) website](#). There are no specific additional food safety handling measures required.

All food businesses operating in Western Australia (WA) are required to comply with the *Food Act 2008*, *Food Regulations 2009*, and the *Australia and New Zealand Food Standards Code* which will manage the risks associated with COVID-19. However, there are some additional practices that will enhance these procedures particularly in relation to managing staff risks. COVID-19 is spread person-to-person through coughing, sneezing, touching contaminated surfaces, and close contact with infected individuals. For this reason, there is a need for food businesses to remain vigilant with cleaning and sanitising regimes and taking extra care with maintaining and promoting safe food and hygiene practices throughout business operations. Additional information on the use of barriers and PPE are provided in this document. While these measures may reduce the risk of transmission, the most effective measures are good hygiene practices, additional sanitisation regimes and social distancing.

The majority of high risk or primary production and processing food businesses are required to have a verified Food Safety Program (FSP), or in the case of meat processing, a Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) based Approved Arrangement (Approved Arrangement), in place. These are documented systems, that document and manage the risks associated with the type of commodity, and the activities (food handling) that occurs throughout the production process to produce the final food product. Ongoing maintenance and review of the food business' FSP or Approved Arrangement is required.

In accordance with existing food legislation, all food businesses, including those operating under a verified FSP or Approved Arrangement are required to take all practicable measures to ensure food is not contaminated. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the following food safety practices are of critical importance and provide additional measures to reduce the potential for the virus to enter the workplace and to minimise the impact on a food business if an employee does contract the virus.

Cleaning information for food safety

General cleaning principles

A food business must adhere to strict and thorough cleaning and sanitising regimes using appropriate food grade sanitisers, of all equipment, food contact surfaces and transport vehicles. Food businesses required to have an FSP or Approved Arrangement in place will have procedures and protocols in place to document and manage cleaning and sanitising of equipment and surfaces. These are working documents and should be reviewed and updated by the business on an ongoing basis.

General food premises cleaning

It is important to ensure thorough and regular cleaning of common contact surfaces, 'high touch' items and shared amenities, such as fridge handles, taps, elevator buttons, lunch rooms, and toilets. It is recommended that the frequency of cleaning in all areas be increased. This is especially important in high traffic areas and any areas accessed by the public.

Additional information on environmental cleaning is available from a range of sources. A number of fact sheets for environmental cleaning in a range of settings are available from the WA Health website, these include:

- [Environmental Cleaning and Disinfection Principles for COVID-19](#)
- [Environmental cleaning in non-healthcare settings](#)
- [Information for public transport and other transport vehicles](#) (provides information on cleaning of vehicles).

General information for cleaning and sanitising for food businesses can be found on the [Department of Health website](#).

Cleaning agents / disinfectants

Chlorine based disinfectants are effective for environmental cleaning and are the most commonly used. Other disinfectant products may also be effective at killing the virus. A list of effective disinfectants for use against coronavirus can be found on the [United States Environmental Protection Agency \(USEPA\) website](#). Contact time and dilution factors are important considerations for ensuring effective disinfection.

Personal hygiene and handwashing

The risk of spreading of COVID-19 can be reduced by practising good hygiene, including:

- Food handlers must ensure the body, or anything from the body including clothing does not contaminate food or surfaces that are likely to come into contact with food.
- Food handlers must thoroughly clean hands by handwashing with soap under warm running water for more than 20 seconds.
- Hands must be washed prior to handling and preparing food, and between touching or handling different food products or equipment. Hands are to be washed immediately

after going to the toilet, sneezing, coughing, drinking, eating, touching hair or face, or similar, and before re-commencing food handling.

- Food handlers must avoid touching the face especially the mouth, eyes and nose
- Food handlers must thoroughly dry hands and use a single use towel to reduce transfer of pathogens to the hand and subsequently to the food or food equipment
- While handwashing should take precedence food handlers should use hand sanitiser and/or anti-bacterial wipes as an alternative where required.

Social distancing

Social distancing is one of the most effective methods of reducing the spread of viruses. The more space between you and others the harder it is for the virus to spread. Social distancing can be used in the work place to minimise the risk of transmission. If a person in the workplace is found to be positive for COVID-19, the risk of transmission to the rest of the workforce is minimised if the work place has been practising social distancing. As well as practising good hygiene and cleanliness, the following approaches will minimise the risk of transmission of communicable diseases in the work place and to maximise continuity of business:

- review shift arrangements to reduce interaction between employees– create small employee teams and have the teams work completely separately from one another, including staggered start and finish times. Reduce the interaction between the teams as much as possible, including carpooling as this reduces the risk of transmission across an entire work place and minimises the number of people which may be associated with a case.
- social distancing during break times – do not allow all employees to use lunch or dining room facilities or communal areas at the same time. Employees should be able to maintain physical distancing protocols i.e. remain at least 1.5m away from each other in both work areas and communal break areas. REMEMBER there should be 4 m² space per employee in any space where people are congregating.
- maintain the social distancing protocol of 1.5m everywhere across the food business as well as outside the workplace, and
- employees should consider getting the annual flu shot

NOTE: The times at which employees are not working, such as meal breaks, toilet breaks, arrival at work and leaving work are often when interaction between employees is most likely, leading to increased risk of transmission. Employees should be vigilant about maintaining social distancing during these work-related transition periods or activities.

Barriers

The most effective way of reducing the risk of introducing and transmitting disease around a workplace is to maintain or increase good hygiene practice and practice social distancing. In instances where social distancing may not always be possible, such as on production lines, physical barriers like Perspex screens between work stations may potentially reduce exposure between employees. However, the effectiveness of such measures against COVID-19 is still not known. There may still be the potential for transmission, depending on the type of barriers introduced and other considerations such as air currents in the vicinity. Therefore, it is essential to maintain good hygiene and cleaning practices.

Personal protective equipment

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) should be used as a last line of defence. Good hygiene practices such as handwashing, cleaning and sanitisation of surfaces and utensils, social distancing and physical barriers are more effective measures for maintaining employee health and reducing the transmission of disease. For work processes where it is not possible to maintain social distancing or create physical barriers between work stations PPE may be worn. However, PPE can provide a false sense of security; to reduce the risk of transmission effectively, PPE must be used, worn and removed correctly. Some considerations when wearing PPE include:

- PPE needs to be applied and removed in the correct way. Training should be provided on the appropriate ways to apply and remove PPE to reduce the risk of cross - contamination
- PPE is only effective if correctly donned, not touched during wearing and changed when it becomes damp or soiled
- The type of PPE available to the non-healthcare settings may not be appropriate.
- Wearing PPE in an agricultural sense may create Occupational Health and Safety issues as wearing PPE for long periods is exhausting and cumbersome
- PPE for long periods is not practical

Contact with public

Where an employee has contact with the public through sales or delivery of product, the same care must be taken to minimise contact using physical distancing measures. Personal hygiene measures must also be undertaken and include:

- Hand washing immediately before and after handling money and before re-commencing food handling
- Hand washing before and after receipt of deliveries

Vigilance in the workplace

Employers should provide employees with additional advice and support to remain vigilant about illness in the workplace. Employers need to provide constant reminders that employees should stay at home or go home if they show signs of any respiratory symptoms. Employees should be supported in their decision to stay at home. Signage is available at the [Department of Health website](#).

Management of sick employees

Any employees suspected of having COVID-19 or displaying symptoms such as coughing, sneezing, flu-like symptoms, and/or gastrointestinal illness, must be removed from the workplace. It is recommended that the employee follows the self-isolation requirements in current [WA State Government](#) directions. The food business must record reported employee illnesses.

What to do when an employee tests positive for COVID-19

An employee who is confirmed as a case of COVID-19 infection will need to go into quarantine to prevent further spread of the virus to fellow workers, the public or their family. All confirmed cases of COVID-19 must undergo a detailed interview by a Public Health team and medical staff to ascertain all close contacts. Close contacts may also need to [self-isolate](#), however, these persons will be contacted by the Department of Health with further instruction. Additional information for employers can be found [on the WA health website](#).

All employees who are probable, confirmed or suspected cases awaiting test results for COVID-19 should self-isolate and follow public health directions. Once they meet criteria for clearance of COVID-19 they may return to work, as directed by their medical professional.

The Department of Health will work with food processing facilities to identify all close contacts of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in their workforce. Consideration will be given to:

- adherence to strict hand washing procedure
- rigorous cleaning and sanitising of environment and equipment
- any enhanced procedures to support social distancing between employees that has been taken
- routine use of PPE by staff (gloves, overalls, masks)

Where the above measures have been taken, a close contact may be considered as:

- an employee who has had greater than 15 minutes cumulative face-to-face contact in any setting over the course of a week in the period extending from 48 hours before onset of symptoms. **OR**
- sharing of a closed space with a confirmed or probable case for a prolonged period (e.g. more than 2 hours) in the period extending from 48 hours before onset of symptoms in the confirmed or probable case.

All close contacts will be required to self-isolate at home for 14 days following their last contact with the confirmed or probable case and follow Public Health directions.

Shutting down a food processing establishment is generally regarded as unlikely, provided the food business has put measures in place to reduce the risk of transfer of COVID-19 between employees.

It is noted that a full shutdown of food processing business may pose a risk to food security and have animal welfare consequences. The food business must be able to demonstrate adequate procedures and processes are in place to manage employee/food handler behaviour.

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