Food Safety and COVID-19

What do we know about food safety and COVID-19?

COVID-19 is caused by one of a family of coronaviruses. COVID-19 is a respiratory illness. The primary route of infection is through air-borne virus particles from the droplets of a sneeze or cough of an infected individual. If you breathe in virus-containing droplets of mucus or saliva from a cough or sneeze, the viruses can multiply in your respiratory tract and make you sick. About 15-30% of common colds every year are caused by a type of coronaviruses. COVID-19 is a particularly virulent and contagious coronavirus. The last major coronavirus epidemic was in 2002 when SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) caused 800 deaths worldwide. COVID-19 is being referred to as SARS-COV-2.

Is COVID-19 going to make us sick through the food that we eat?

There is no evidence that COVID-19 is a foodborne illness. The way that we get the COVID-19 illness is primarily from breathing in infected droplets from someone coughing or sneezing. Another way that we may get sick is from contact transmission. Contact transmission is touching a contaminated surface and transferring live virus particles to the mucus membranes in our nose, mouth or eyes. We transfer the virus by touching our mouth, nose or eyes. There isn't any evidence that you can get COVID-19 from food.

How is COVID-19 different from something like Salmonella?

Salmonellosis, the illness from Salmonella, is caused by a bacteria not a virus. When we get sick from Salmonella, we have eaten a food with Salmonella bacteria in it. The Salmonella bacteria survive being destroyed by the acid in our stomach and end up in our gut, our small intestine. In the warm environment of our small intestine, the Salmonella bacteria start growing and make us sick. A foodborne illness is a gastrointestinal illness, not a respiratory illness. Some people say that a foodborne illness gives them flu-like symptoms, but that is incorrect, the flu is a respiratory illness, not an illness in your gastrointestinal tract.

Even though there isn't any evidence that food can make you sick, people are still worried. Yes, there are a lot of questions about COVID-19 and food that we might buy or prepare for our family.

While many restaurants are closed, some are open for take-out or delivery. Is carry-out food safe?

Yes, take-out food appears to be safe. There is no evidence that you can get the COVID-19 from take-out food. We don't have any evidence that you can get sick if someone who is ill contaminates the food they are preparing for you or contaminates a food package. But we all want to be extra safe just now, so there are some extra precautions that you can take for take-out food:

· Order from a reputable business that is more likely to provide sick leave and have a strong wellness policy;

· If the food needs to be cooked or reheated, cook to proper temperatures (the virus that causes COVID-19 appears to be killed by standard cooking or reheating temperatures); and

· Most importantly, wash your hands after handling any food package material and before preparing food or eating.

What about grocery store items? Do we need to let packaged food like cans of soup or boxes of cereal sit in the car for 24 hours before bringing it into my kitchen?

No. Information is circulating that the COVID-19 virus can survive on surfaces for perhaps several days. But there is no clear evidence that we can get sick from contact transmission of the virus; touching an unclean surface and then getting sick from that.

For grocery store items, hand washing is the best approach. Wash hands before, and after, handling any food packages. When you bring home packaged food, wash your hands before putting packages away. After picking a can or package of food from your pantry or refrigerator, wash your hands before preparing the product and always wash your hands before eating. Social distancing and washing hands (often) are the way to keep from becoming ill with COVID-19.

What about fresh produce?

That seems different, do we continue to eat fresh fruits and vegetables? Yes. There is no reason to assume that fresh fruits and vegetables are unsafe. Regardless of where the produce is from, fruits and vegetables are a healthy part of the diet.

We know that the COVID-19 virus doesn't appear to last long on organic surfaces like the outside of fruits and vegetables, and it doesn't appear that we can get sick from 'eating' the virus. But there are some general food safety steps that we always recommend when eating or preparing fresh fruits and vegetables.

Start by washing your hands, then rinse all fresh fruits and vegetables with clean running water and dry with a paper towel before you eat or prepare them. Scrub the surfaces of melons, apples or other firm items. If you want an added safety step, dip rinsed fruits and vegetables in a vinegar solution of 2 cups vinegar + 2 cups water, allow to stand for 1 minute, then rinse again with clean water and dry with a paper towel. Research has shown that this vinegar rinse will help remove harmful bacteria like Salmonella. Whether the vinegar rinse will destroy the coronavirus, we don't yet know but we do know that it won't hurt.

What can I do to help make sure that the food that someone prepares for, and feeds, their family is safe?

Foodborne bacteria like Salmonella make thousands of people sick every year. The food safety steps you can take to make sure you don't get a foodborne illness like salmonellosis can also help protect you from the coronavirus. Follow these 5 easy steps:

1. Clean hands and surfaces often. Hand washing is key in fighting COVID-19.

2. Cook food to proper temperatures. The coronavirus will be killed by proper cooking or reheating.

3. Chill, keep cold foods cold and refrigerate leftovers promptly.

4. Separate to prevent cross-contamination. Hand washing will help to prevent cross-transfer.

5. Choose safe foods and practice safe eating habits. Avoid raw meat, seafood, eggs; raw flour or dough; raw milk; and sprouted seeds (sprouts).

You keep mentioning hand washing. Why is that so important? Is there a special way to wash our hands?

The Centers for Disease Control says that hand washing is the most important defense against all illnesses; a foodborne illness like Salmonella or a respiratory illness like COVID-19. Hand washing with plain soap and water is easy and one of the best ways to fight the coronavirus.

Hand washing is easy:

· Wet hands with warm running water and apply soap. Use a bar soap or liquid hand soap, either will work.

· Rub hands together to make a lather. Lather for at least 20 seconds. The time it takes to sing the ABC song.

· Rinse hands well under running water.

· Dry, preferably with a paper towel. But a clean cloth towel will work too.

What about instant hand sanitizers?

The Centers for Disease Control says that washing with soap and water is the best way to clean our hands. But hand sanitizers may be OK in a pinch, when soap and water aren't available. Choose a hand sanitizer with 60-70% alcohol. Rub the hand sanitizer across your hands, the palms and top of your hands and between your fingers, for 20 seconds. Let air dry. Don't dry your hands on your pants or clothes, this might make them dirty all over again.