

RISK OF COVID-19 FOR TAKE OUT, FOOD DELIVERY, & GROCERY SHOPPING

MARCH 27, 2020 --- ABBEY SHARP RD

We discuss the risks and the necessary safety precautions to take with the Coronavirus COVID-19 for food take out, food delivery, grocery shopping and food preparation.

These days, I am starting to forget what I even thought about before COVID-19 took over our newsfeeds. With a constant influx of information and growing statistics every day, we are exposed to what feels like a never-ending flood of coronavirus related information, and with good reason. There is a very serious global pandemic happening that is urgently calling on every single one of us to do our part and take the necessary precautions to protect ourselves, and our community. One of the most significant impacts the coronavirus outbreak has had has been on our local restaurants and grocery stores (bye bye toilet paper). These essential businesses remain open and accessible to us while we weather the storm that is COVID-19.

But is there a risk of infection when shopping at the grocery store? Is take out or delivery really a better option? Is it safer to go in the store or have someone pick out our groceries and have them delivered? With growing misinformation online, it can be difficult to weed out the facts and implement the proper safety precautions. We took a look at the latest evidence to date to determine the risk of COVID-19 and safety precautions you should take when ordering take out, getting food delivery and grocery shopping to minimize your risk of exposure. Because hey, we all have to eat.

CAN COVID-19 BE TRANSMITTED THROUGH FOOD?

Given the rapid spread of coronavirus world-wide, there's no surprise that there have been mounting concerns of potentially ingesting food that has come in contact with COVID-19. However, according to multiple health and safety organizations around the globe (including Health Canada, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, the European Food Safety Authority, and the U.S Department of Agriculture) there is currently no evidence to suggest that food is a likely route of transmission for COVID-19. Even though we don't know this for sure as the evidence on covid-19 continues to develop every day, the latest research suggests that COVID-19 does not fit typical models of food borne outbreaks. According to the FDA, a virus can only be classified as foodborne when "two or more people get the same illness from the same contaminated food or drink".



As of this date, there has not been a single positive case that has been linked to food. In fact, a study done in Singapore investigated a group of individuals with confirmed cases of COVID-19 to assess possible modes of transmission. Through an extensive interview process, the study found that all cases could be traced back to local transmission through clusters of people included a tour group, a conference, and a church gathering. There were no cases that were linked to contaminated food. There were some early reports that suggested that even if you did ingest the virus through contaminated food, stomach acid should efficiently inactivate the virus.

However, it appears this may not be true as early research has shown that some cases of COVID-19 present with digestive symptoms like diarrhea and a lack of appetite, leading us to believe that the virus may have an effect on the gastrointestinal tract. However, research in this area is limited and further study on the effects of COVID-19 on the digestive system is necessary.

Even though there is limited data on how long coronavirus can last on food, what we do know is that the virus remains more stable on non-porous surfaces like metals and plastics, and breaks down faster on organic surfaces like cardboard and food. It's also important to consider that we all eat multiple times a day, and if there was strong link between food and coronavirus transmission, it would have likely been detected by now.

IS THERE A RISK OF COVID-19 BEING TRANSMITTED THROUGH FOOD PACKAGING?

If someone who is infected with covid-19 were to touch your food package, you would think that this would increase the likelihood of you contracting the virus, right? Well, not exactly. Even though there is no evidence to suggest that food packaging is associated with the transmission of COVID-19, food packages *could* potentially carry the virus if it has come in contact with an infected person. However, experts suggest that the risk of transmission is still very low compared to other exposure routes, like person-to-person contact, which are far more likely. You are actually more likely to become infected when interacting with the worker handling the food than from the food or food packaging itself.

According to the latest research the coronavirus is able to remain viable for hours and up to several days on some surfaces, including copper (up to 4 hours), cardboard (for up to 24 hours), stainless steel (up to 3 days), and plastic (up to 3 days). This means that if a delivery person or package handler infected with COVID-19 were to cough or sneeze on a plastic takeout package, the virus could (in theory) be able to stay on the package for several days afterwards.

Now before we get into what to do about these risks, let's look at some of the modes of getting foods and your relative risk for each.

MINIMIZING RISK OF COVID-19 EXPOSURE WHEN GROCERY SHOPPING



Many of us have flooded to the grocery store aisles in a panicked sweat to stock up on the necessary essentials needed to hunker down in our homes for what feels like an eternity. Even though panic buying and hoarding food supplies has been deemed highly unnecessary (#toiletpapergate), I would say it's not a bad idea to have a few extra pantry items in the event that you get infected with COVID-19 and need to self-isolate for a few weeks.

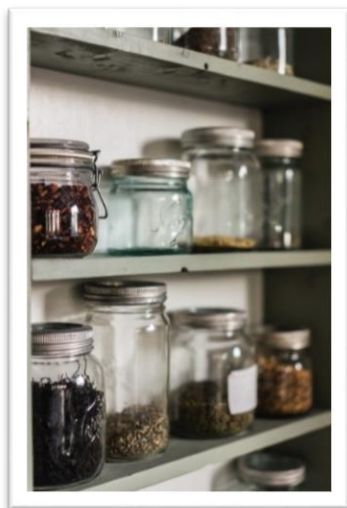
But is going to the grocery store safe? Is there a risk of contracting Covid-19 when grocery shopping? Well, the honest answer is yes, there is a risk. The biggest risks you may be subjected to when going to the grocery store is being exposed to large crowds of people who may be infected with the virus (even those who are not showing signs and feel healthy). There also lies the possibility of an infected person coughing or sneezing on grocery carts, food items, or in checkout lines, thereby increasing the risk of exposure to other individuals. Scary as it may be to venture into a potentially infected area, there are several precautionary measures you can take when shopping for groceries to keep you and others safe from the risk of COVID-19:

- Go to the grocery store as little as you can manage. Plan your meals so you know exactly what you need for at least a full week so you don't have to return to the store several times.
- Go to the grocery store at off peak times to avoid crowds (i.e. go early in the morning or late at night)
- If you have a bottle of hand sanitizer, bring it with you and apply it to your hands before and after leaving the store

- Minimize contact with grocery items by following the “You touch it, you buy it” rule
- Avoid touching your face, mouth, eyes, and nose
- Keep a distance of at least 6 meters from the people around you and while waiting in line. Some stores have actually begun to ensure that shoppers stay 6-feet apart by marking these measurements on the ground.
- If available, use self-checkout to reduce contact with other people. However, be mindful of touchscreen displays and barcode scanners and be sure to sanitize your hands after each use. If you do not have hand sanitizer available to you (some stores may or may not have hand sanitizing stations at the store) wait until you get home to thoroughly wash your hands and avoid touching your face
- Bring your own reusable grocery bags and bag your own groceries instead of having them handled by another person
- Avoid using cash and use tap transactions if possible
- Wash your hands thoroughly as soon as you get home
- Use package disinfecting strategies and take safe food preparation precautions which we will talk more about below
- Most importantly – DO NOT go to the grocery store if you are showing symptoms of COVID-19 or suspect you have been exposed to the virus.

TIPS ON SHOPPING FOR ESSENTIAL FOOD ITEMS

It is recommended to gradually build up your food supply at home by stocking up on approximately two weeks-worth of fresh and non-perishable food items in the event that you get sick and have to self-isolate. Some good options to consider include:



1. Fruit and Vegetables

Buy fresh, frozen, and canned varieties. Fresh vegetables that have a longer shelf life include carrots, potatoes, beets, onions, squash, cabbage, and cauliflower. Fruits like apples and oranges may also last a long time.

2. Grains

Stock up on your favourite grains like dried pasta, rice, quinoa, couscous, and oatmeal.

3. Proteins

Canned proteins like beans, tuna, or salmon are excellent options when you need protein in a pinch. Raw meat, poultry, and fish can be batch cooked or kept frozen for future dates. It’s also a good idea to stock up on some shelf stable milk alternatives (like soy, almond, or oatmilk), nut butters, nuts & seeds, or protein powder.

4. Ready to eat foods

If you don’t feel like cooking every day, stock up on some extra canned soups, frozen pizzas or lasagnas, or anything other quick meals that you prefer.

If you need some healthy recipe ideas using pantry staples, we put together a comprehensive list of easy recipes using pantry & freezer staples which you can find [here](#).

WHAT ABOUT GROCERY DELIVERY OR PICK-UP OPTIONS?

If you do not feel comfortable going to the grocery store at all, you may have access to online grocery delivery services in your area or you may also request to have your groceries picked up directly from the store. Some Canadian grocery stores that offer pick-up services include Loblaws, Metro, Walmart and No Frills. Other services like InstaCart, Instabugby, Cornershop and Cartly allow you to make purchases from different grocery stores in your area and deliver them right to your door.

The downside of this is that a lot of people are finding that these grocery delivery and pick up apps are severely backed-up, so if you don't plan your menu and list a week in advance or more, you might be out of luck.

Also, this entails is having another human shop for your groceries, bag them and then you either pick them up or they safe drop them by your door. The benefit of this is that you don't go into the grocery store, which is particularly important if you yourself are sick so you don't infect others. But what if your shopper was unknowingly sick? Are there any extra precautions you should take in this case?

This is where you may want to employ some extra disinfectant and food safety precautions which we will talk more about in detail below.

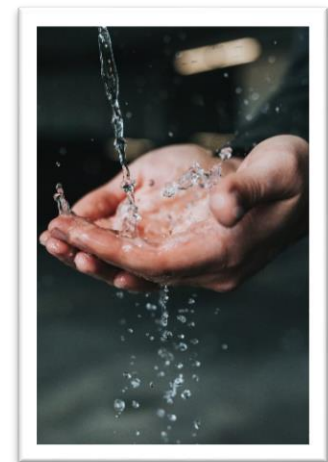
SAFETY AND RISK OF COVID-19 INFECTION FOR TAKE OUT & DELIVERY



While many of us are fortunate enough to work from home or take a leave of absence from work to limit our exposure to the outside world, food service workers still have to get up and go to work every day to provide us access to take-out and delivery services. However, concerns have been raised around the safety and risks of ordering take-out and food delivery. What if a delivery driver has coronavirus and touches my meal? What if the line cook has COVID-19 and is preparing my food?

Well, according to the latest research, there is no current evidence to suggest that takeout or drive-thru meals can increase the risk of contracting coronavirus. Opting for take-out and delivery is actually much safer than dining at a restaurant, which most of us can't even do because they've been thankfully forced to close. This is because take out and food delivery limits the amount of social contact and thereby makes it easier to maintain social distance from other individuals potentially infected with the virus.

Many delivery services have now implemented practices that limit the amount of contact one may have with the delivery person in order to further reduce risk. For example, many online ordering services (like Uber Eats, for example) have implemented contactless deliveries allowing the option to leave deliveries at the door. Other drive thru and take out services have also completely eliminated cash payments and use touch free or card only transactions.



Now I fully understand the concern about a sick line cook or delivery person touching your food. But as we've already discussed, current research does suggest that the risk of infection from touching food or packaging that have been exposed to the virus is relatively low. Having said that, if you have any concern about the early state of this research, and want to take extra precautions to further minimize the risk of possible infection, you can follow these steps when ordering food through takeout or delivery.

1. Use hand sanitizer or wash hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds before handling food packaging
2. Carefully remove food from packaging
3. Immediately dispose of food packaging
4. Transfer food using tongs or spoons to a clean plate or container
5. Use hand sanitizer or wash hands with soap & water for 20 seconds before eating
6. Reheat your food, if possible, which I will talk about in a minute and avoid ordering raw salad-bar type foods that can't be cooked and may be sitting out in the open where others can sneeze or cough on it.

SHOULD I USE GLOVES WHEN HANDLING GROCERIES, TAKE-OUT & DELIVERY?

Experts and top health authorities strongly recommend that the BEST thing you can do to protect yourself from COVID-19 is to wash your hands, avoid touching your face, and practice social distancing. The latest recommendations suggest that the use of medical gloves when handling groceries or food packages is NOT essential if you are already practicing good hand hygiene before and after handling food and food packages.



Some experts have said that gloves, like a mask, may also give one a sense of false security against the virus and may cause someone to inadvertently washing their hands less, which is ultimately more effective in preventing infection. Some recent reports from the FDA also caution that medical grade gloves may soon become high demand for health care providers and there may be a risk of global shortage in the near future.

However, my personal observation has been that because hand sanitizer and even disposable disinfectant wipes are hard to get a hold of, and people often cannot wash their hands immediately after paying for groceries until coming home, NON-MEDICAL GRADE gloves may remind you not to touch your face and may protect you until you CAN safely wash your hands thoroughly. Therefore, if you do wish to use gloves for grocery or food handling: a) save medical grade gloves for our health care workers, and b) ALWAYS wash your hands thoroughly immediately after discarding them before touching anything else.

PRACTICING FOOD SAFETY DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO CLEAN & DISINFECT FOOD PACKAGES & SURFACES?

So of course we all hope that people working in restaurants or grocery stores are feeling well and not sneezing or coughing on food packaging. But in the event that this were to occur, there are measures you can take to properly disinfect packaging and other high-touch surfaces in your home to minimize your risk of contact with covid-19. Current evidence suggests that the best way to disinfect surfaces is to use any of the following:

1. Soap and water (ideally a dish detergent)
2. Diluted household bleach solutions
3. Alcohol solutions with at least 70% alcohol
4. Store-bought disinfectant wipes

HOW TO STERILIZE FOOD



Exact heating temperatures and times for disinfecting food that may have come in contact with COVID-19 are still being researched. However, scientists suggest a temperature of 149 F (65C) for at least 3 minutes is sufficient. Other heating methods to kill viruses and bacteria from food include heating liquids (i.e. soups, stews, sauces) to a brief simmer and making sure to stir frequently so that it is heated evenly throughout. As well as, microwaving food until piping hot. For most microwaves, this usually means heating for 90 seconds on high heat.

PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR REDUCING THE RISK OF ANY FOOD

Again, the currently research suggests that food and food packaging is likely relatively low risk, but here are some extra precautions that you can take to make sure everything is fully safe to eat.

1. Wash any produce under cool running water with a vegetable brush making sure to regularly clean the brush with soap and water
2. Wipe down any cardboard packages, cans, or bottles with an alcohol solution (70% alcohol or higher), a diluted bleach solution, or disinfectant wipes.
3. Cook anything you can't wash thoroughly with water to at least 149 F for at least 3 minutes.
4. Re-heat any prepared foods for 90 seconds on high in the microwave
5. Purchase raw produce in sealed packaging (ie. bagged or boxed salad greens rather than loose) and be sure to disinfect packaging before storing

THE BOTTOM LINE ON COVID-19 RISK AND FOOD SAFETY

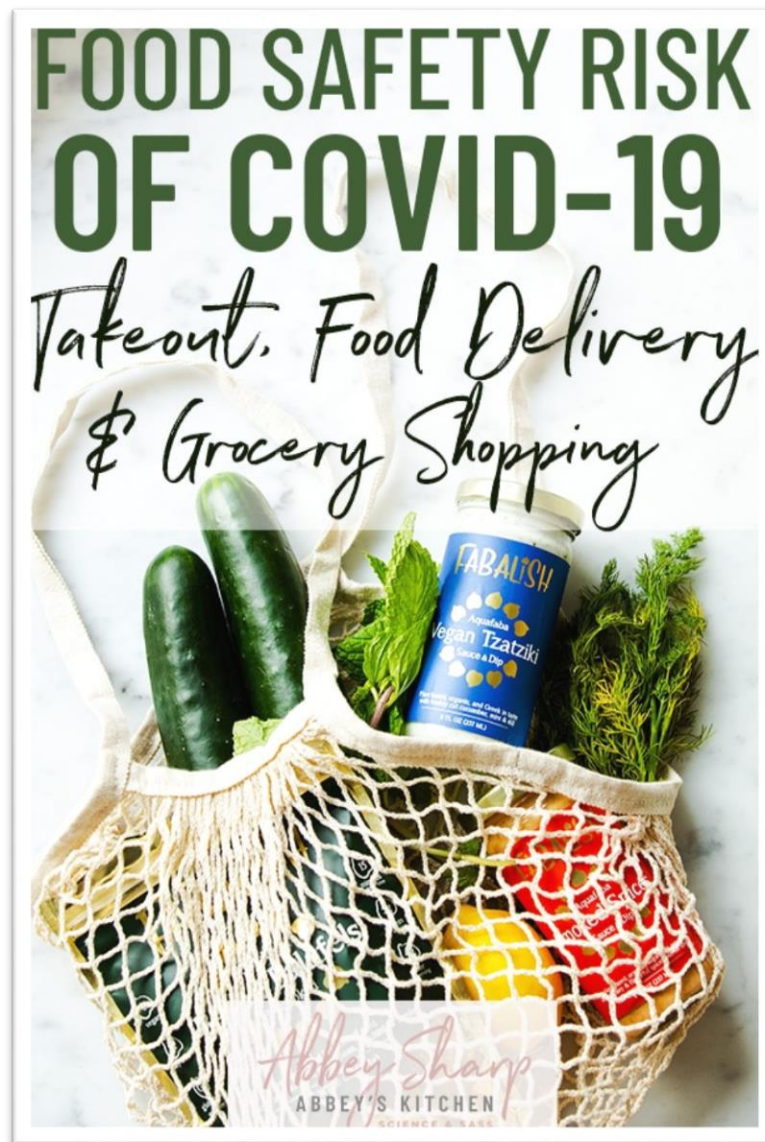
The bottom line is that there is a relatively low risk of COVID-19 infection from the food supply or through take out & delivery services. Ultimately, your risk of COVID-19 infection is dependent on your interaction and proximity to individuals who may potentially be infected with the virus. That is why social distancing is so important and should be considered when making food decisions.

A good rule of thumb is to consider ways to minimize the amount of touch points/contact with other people, as this is the best way to reduce your risk of exposure to the virus. From this perspective, food delivery (whether it be delivery of pre-prepared foods or grocery delivery) would have the least amount of risk as you are only making contact with one person. You can also specify no contact rules in your order by having the delivery person drop food off at your door and may have the option to pay online to avoid paying at the door. Though still considered relatively low risk, picking up take-out orders or groceries would have a higher amount of risk in comparison to delivery, as there are more touch points involved. Touch points might include driving or taking public transit, opening doors, exposure to crowded environments, waiting in line, interacting with food service workers or cashiers, and making a payment.

Even though the current early research we have does not suggest that food is a high risk transporter of the virus, you can also take extra precautions with the food you bring into the house to further minimize risk.

I hope you can use this information to make mindful decisions and that they bring you a sense of control rather than more anxiety about food. Please take care of your yourself and make sure you are getting enough sleep, reducing stress, and eating well, while keeping yourself, your family, and your community as safe as possible.

Correction: An earlier version of this article recommended the use of gloves when handling groceries and takeout & food delivery. Due to changing reports and recommendations by experts, we have made changes to this article to reflect current recommendations.



Contribution by Giselle Segovia RD MHSc