Common Questions About Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Food

Can you get coronavirus from eating out or from food packaging? What can you do if you have to grocery shop and more.

May 7, 2020 By Danielle Penick

Almost overnight the coronavirus has drastically altered many of our daily routines. And as a result I've been getting more and more questions about what to buy at the grocery store (which I wrote about here), how to safely shop, and if the virus can infect you through food or food packaging. I've also been asked all kinds of questions ranging from should I leave my food out of the house for a few days, to should I wash food and packaging with soap and water, or should I avoid getting food to go? When the pandemic first hit, I wondered many of the same things.

There's so little that we know about this novel virus as a whole, but there is some information to get you started. The good news is so far, from what we know, COVID-19 specifically is spread via droplet transmission since it is a respiratory virus and the risk of being transmitted through food is very very low. Overall, the survivability of the virus on surfaces is relatively short lived depending on the surface (usually 1-2 days). So the risk of contracting the virus from food products or packaging is low. However, good hand hygiene is still important! To help reduce larger risks from exposure we can try to online shopping with delivery to our homes for a fee or opt for curbside pickup at your local store. Below I review the risks associated with food shopping, takeout, and tips to help you and your family minimize your risks during this time.

Getting Takeout or Fast Food

When the mandatory stay in place orders were established, my husband and I thought about the restaurants we wanted to continue to support during this time and to see which one's were offering curbside pickup. Lately we have been making weekly orders at one of our favorite restaurants to help ensure they last through the pandemic. We felt pretty safe with this option since the risk of getting it from food is incredibly low. Your biggest worry with this method however is your exposure to people. Therefore it's important to continue to maintain your distance from the delivery person as best as you can and to avoid cash or card payments if possible (try to pay online or over the phone before pick up). But the exception to food exposure risk of course would be if someone coughs or sneezes on your food and then you put it in your mouth. It is also possible to get COVID-19 by touching surfaces, like a table at the restaurant or the food packaging if it has the virus on it and then you touch your face. So washing your hands often and well is critical after handling any food packaging or take out bags.

Restaurants have also been taking additional precautions during the pandemic due to heightened awareness and are already held to high standards for food safety. But if there is still some worry, the virus is also destroyed at hight heat so you can also reheat your food to reduce risk once you are home to make sure the the virus is killed. Overall, as mentioned above the risk from getting take out is quite low. But if you are immunocompromised, it may not be worth the risk for you.

Home Grocery Delivery

This is something that I've done a few times now during the pandemic to reduce my exposure risk by avoiding going to the store. It's important to note that most grocery stores offering this service will charge a fee and encourage tipping. This did increase our grocery bill a bit, so it's good to be aware. The service is easy—you order what you want online, you can select a date and a time for the delivery, and you can even opt to have them leave it at your front door to skip person to person handoffs as a means to have a contactless delivery. Of note, from my experience you want to order days earlier than you need the items as there is a delay. For example, on average it took about 3-5 days for our orders to come. For this reason and due to the cost, my recommendation is to order every week to two weeks and stock up if you can.

Curbside Pickup

I first experienced curbside pickup this past week. We realized that it's free and you don't have to tip (at least where we live). This option also gives us a great excuse to get out of the house and to start our cars. This process is also relatively simple since you order online, choose a date and a time to pick up. Once you get to the store, you then call from outside and someone will come and bring your groceries to your trunk, thus eliminating any hand off contact as well. For me, it was the best of all worlds and I have since transitioned to this method only. But this may not be an option for everyone depending on geographic location and resources. There was also a multiple day delay for this service, so you will want to order before you need things with this option too.

Kelly Sikkema/Unsplash

In person grocery shopping

But what if must you absolutely go to the grocery store? There are some tips for how to navigate the market more safety. First and foremost, if you are sick or have flu like symptoms absolutely do NOT go to the grocery store! Anyone who is elderly, has an underlying health condition, or has a compromised immune system, consider not going to the store if that's possible. If you do go into the store avoid peak hours if you can as the biggest risk is being around people. When going into the store wear a face mask and try to avoid touching door handles, handrails, or touch screens at the register. Also make sure to wipe down carts or baskets with disinfectant wipes before use and consider avoiding reusable bags. Wash hands when able and bring hand sanitizer to use in between washings. Remember it must be at least 60% alcohol based to be effective.

Once you're in the store focus more on people and not as much on the food. Avoid crowds and shop quickly to limit exposure. Aim to be at least 6 feet away from shoppers and this includes when you are in the checkout lines—don't forget to give the cashier space too. If you choose to wear gloves, don't touch your face and throw them away after a single use. If you don't wear gloves properly, you could cross-contaminate different items so they may cause more harm than good.

While shopping avoid touching unnecessary items. Now is not the time to browse the store and feel every produce option just to look at new things. Also, try to avoid touching multiple produce items at the same time. Limit your personal interactions with people if possible as well. Since it's a respiratory illness, it's best to talk, cough, sneeze as little as possible. If someone is too close, you can politely ask them for space. Follow floor decals if able, many stores are now using these a guides to help people keep their distance. There are also some aisles that are now marked as one way so it's good to read the signs so that you aren't that person who's going the wrong way.

Go to the store prepared! Have a list and try to have it organized by section of the store so that you spend less time there. Many stores are also taking critical steps by limiting the number of people in the store at a single time for example. Shop alone if possible too.

Finally once home, wash your hands thoroughly (think the Happy Birthday song twice!). Consider bleaching or disinfecting the surfaces at home that your groceries came into contact with. It is not certain how long the COVID-19 virus survives on surfaces, but it appears to be similar to other coronaviruses. Research suggests it may persist on surfaces for several hours or up to several days depending on the material.

General tips

Don't believe everything you see online, even if it's from a doctor (especially a celebrity doctor). There are a lot of videos going around with misinformation, including one instructing people to leave their groceries outside of their houses for up to 3 days! This is a terrible idea as it could lead to a food borne illness. Obviously it's okay if it is non-perishable groceries or non-food items

however. As an extra precaution, you can wipe boxes or cans with disinfectant wipes or use soap and water, but make sure that the chemicals don't come into contact with the food as some of these chemicals may be harmful when consumed.

Of note, you don't need to rewash pre-baged salad mixes since they have already been washed. This just increases the risk for more potential contamination. When cleaning non-rewashed produce you probably want to skip the soap as research has shown that household soaps are not meant for food and can lead to vomiting and diarrhea. Soaps can penetrate into produce and large amounts of soap can damage your esophagus over time.

If produce is damaged, before eating it cut away the damaged or bruised areas. Rinse the produce before you peel it so that dirt, viruses, or bacteria aren't transferred from the knife onto the fruit or vegetable. Finally, the temperature of the fridge or freezer will not kill the virus. If anything, it can preserve it longer. This is why scientists are able to later study pathogens down the road after freezing them at extremely cold temperatures. So you still need to wash your food before you put it into storage.

Resources

There is probably more misinformation online than there isn't regarding COVID-19 unfortunately. Personally, I stick with the Center's for Disease Control, university websites, and other reputable science based organizations. But here are some of my favorites that I've stumbled across when doing research for this piece for reference.

COVID-19 Waiting Times for Grocery Shopping

Food Safety and Coronavirus: A Comprehensive Guide

Science Vs Podcast – Coronavirus: Should I disinfect everything?

Food and Drug Administration – Food Safety and the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Vox – Your Coronavirus Grocery Questions, Answered by Experts

Sounds Bites Podcast – What You Need to Know About Coronavirus & Food

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