

Guidelines from experts on COVID-19 and food safety

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The Food Safety Information Council today released information about coronaviruses, COVID-19 and food safety.

Cathy Moir, Council Chair, said that consumers have been in contact asking questions about food safety during the pandemic.

"The good news is that Food Standards Australia New Zealand states that there is no international evidence so far that the virus causing COVID-19 is transmitted through eating food. Spread of respiratory droplets from person to person and close personal contact are known to be the most common ways to spread [coronavirus](#). Touching surfaces and objects and then your eyes, nose or mouth may also be a way to transfer the virus.

"At the moment we have to radically change our lifestyles. We have to stay at home as much as possible and increasing numbers of people are being required to home isolate for 14 days or more. Someone will have to go out and buy food periodically and it is possible you are buying up and preparing a little extra food to last 2 weeks.

"There are two important messages on handling food and food safety at this time. One is about preventing COVID-19 spread and shopping for food and the other is about keeping your food safe and preventing [food poisoning](#) at home.

"The elderly and those with compromised immunity are at greatest risk from both COVID-19 as well as food poisoning. We know less about COVID-19 risks for children and pregnant women. All these groups are at highest risk for food poisoning.

"Even though the risk of transmission of coronavirus via food surfaces is small, remember everyday food safety measures help prevent food poisoning, caused by viruses as well as other microbes, so will help to keep you safe. This advice not only helps now but also helps reduce the rate of food poisoning in Australia which, in a normal year, results in a considerable burden upon our health system with an estimated 4.1 million cases resulting in 31,920 hospitalisations and 1 million visits to doctors.

"Here are some food safety tips based on your questions about coronavirus and COVID-19:

Handwashing. It's great to see everyone focussed on washing their hands often with soap and running water for 20 seconds (especially as our survey last year found 40% of respondents admitted that they didn't always wash their hands before touching food). Soap is important as it breaks down the fats and grime on our hands and helps remove viruses and bacteria. Both liquid soap and bar soap are fine. The running water helps further by washing the grime, viruses and bacteria away. Use alcohol gel if handwashing facilities aren't available.

Hand drying. Do this for 20 seconds too as dry hands are less likely to pick up viruses and bacteria. If you are using a public washroom use either paper towel or an electric hand dryer but you may need to dry a little longer with the electric dryer

depending on its power. Use a clean, dry towel at home and you will need to replace wet towels more often with increased handwashing.

Shopping. Follow the instructions provided by your supermarket or food retailer about hand hygiene and social distancing to protect yourself and others. Many supermarkets offer to wipe trolley handles with sanitizer when you enter the store. Don't put unpackaged [fresh fruit](#) and veg directly into your trolley but use the plastic bags provided for your [fresh produce](#). Don't handle produce items and put them back for others or taste test the grapes as you touch your mouth with your hands. Shopping bags should not be placed on any food preparation benches to prevent contamination. Wash your hands immediately when you return home from shopping and again after putting away groceries.

Home deliveries. These deliveries can offer some protection by reducing contact with others. There is no evidence to date that coronavirus has been transferred by food packaging whether for groceries or take away. As with all you do at present, take precautions and wash your hands after handling the delivery.

"Here are some general tips about safe handling of food at home:

If you are ill. Do not prepare food for other people if you are unwell, with a respiratory illness or gastro, as you risk passing the illness on to them. Cover all coughs and sneezes so you don't contaminate the kitchen environment and food. Wash hands regularly and clean benches and utensils. If you are the only available cook, eg a single parent, cook a frozen meal or something simple that requires minimal handling, or order a home delivered takeaway.

Fresh produce. Fresh fruit and vegetables should be washed under [running water](#) before you eat them. Don't use hand sanitizer or body soap to clean produce as these may contain chemicals you don't want to consume (and it will taste nasty!) if you grow your own food, don't water it with 'grey' water from washing machines, baths, showers or handwashing.

Storing food and date labels. Food must be used or frozen by its use by date. Check any storage instructions on packaging such as "store under 4°C," "keep frozen" or "use within three days of opening package." Food can still be sold or eaten after its best before date but may have lost some nutrition or quality. Put newly purchased items at the back of the pantry shelf or fridge so you use older items first. If you and the kids are stuck at home you might want to tidy out the pantry, freezer and fridge and see who can find the most out of date item!

Cooking. A lot of people have asked about bulk cooking soups, casseroles and stews for freezing. If you do this divide the food into small containers like take away containers so that it cools faster, label with the date, and refrigerate or freeze. Don't let the food cool to room temperature as bacteria can grow and dangerous toxins can form. Use any refrigerated food within two to three days or freeze it. If you are new to cooking, especially while you are home more, try simple dishes at first and follow the recipe.

Home delivered food. We will be likely to eat more home-delivered food in coming times, whether it is online grocery deliveries or takeaway from your favourite restaurant. Make sure hot food, or food that needs refrigeration or freezing isn't left more than an hour on the doorstep.

Refreezing food. It is safe to refreeze food that has been defrosted, for example if you defrosted too much meat for dinner, as long as it hasn't been left on the bench to defrost. Refrozen food may be slightly watery and lose a little quality as freezing breaks down the food structure. You can also defrost food to cook into a dish and then refreeze the dish. You can usually find out how long various foods will last in the freezer from information on the lid or door of your freezer.

Don't take food poisoning risks. Finally reduce your risk of food poisoning by always washing your hands, chopping boards and utensils after handling raw meat, raw poultry and egg shells. Use a meat thermometer to cook riskier foods such as sausages, hamburgers, rolled roasts, minced meat and leftovers to 75°C in the centre. Eggs are

nutritious and convenient but raw or slightly cooked egg dishes such as mayonnaise, eggnog, health shakes, steak tartare and mousses are a food poisoning risk and best avoided. Use a fridge thermometer to check your fridge is always running at 5°C or below. If you don't have a meat or fridge thermometer order one next time you do some online shopping.

"There is plenty of [food safety](#) information on our website www.foodsafety.asn.au and we can also answer your enquiries if you email us from the website. Finally, don't forget to keep supporting [food](#) charities like Foodbank and OzHarvest who are feeding those who need it in these difficult times. We are also a health promotion charity that does not receive any Federal Government funding and you can make a tax-deductible donation to us here. We hope you all stay safe," Ms Moir concluded.

Provided by Food Safety Information Council

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