

COVID-19 food hygiene: A food microbiologist's top 3 tips

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Washing your fruit and veggies under running water before consumption is enough to eliminate the virus early. Credit: Shutterstock

While a trip to the supermarket has become a little different for most of us, what shouldn't change are basic safe food hygiene practices.

UNSW Associate Professor of Food Microbiology, Julian Cox, says that there are a lot of misconceptions around washing foods, particularly fruit and veggies.

"There is no evidence to suggest the virus can be transmitted through food—but of course, we want to reinforce that while we navigate these uncharted waters, we must always take hygiene, including the handling of food, seriously."

Here are A/Prof Cox's top tips on safe food hygiene practices:

1. Clean, clean and clean

"Cleaning is so important; it should be counted as three tips!" says A/Prof Cox.

"We don't want people to lose sight of traditional food safety issues like time-temperature control but really the key message is cleaning," he says.

He stresses that we often wash our fresh fruits and veggies before consumption anyway, and this will help eliminate the virus early in the chain.

"Washing them under fresh running water is sufficient—I advise against using cleaning products on foods," he says.

"We really don't want cleaning chemicals going on our food as that might be unpleasant, even harmful, when we consume it."

He also recommends thoroughly cleaning the area where you prepare food with a standard surface sanitiser from the supermarkets.

As we would when preparing foods in normal times, wash hands regularly, such as after using the toilet and after handling raw foods, to maintain good personal and food hygiene.

Additionally, follow the advice from health authorities and wash your hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds.

2. Social distancing! Surface distancing!

While we should social distance from each other, A/Prof Cox says we should also keep away from surfaces where the virus might be.

"We want to keep the virus on a [surface](#) away from our own key surfaces as well—our eyes, nose, and mouth," he says.

For example, when you bring home your groceries from the shops, avoid putting the bags on the same kitchen counter you'd prepare foods on.

"We also don't want to use sanitizers all over our

[packaging](#) as this can remove important food safety bugs can grow. information such as use by dates."

A/Prof Cox says if you're really worried about packaging, decant the food as soon as you get home to avoid contamination, but remember to record key product information.

"When you decant items such as flour or sugar, make sure you transfer the food out of the packaging with minimal handling of the package itself," he says.

"Remember though, that the risk of transmission of the virus from packaging is very low, and survival on surfaces is limited—and food packaging is ["not known to present any specific risk of transmission."](#)

"So food is, generally, best left in its packaging, for food safety's sake.

"Again, if you're worried about picking up the virus from packaging, wash your hands well before you eat and when you put your hands near your own surfaces.

"In general, the same guides apply when ordering takeaway; with food for immediate consumption, you may wish to transfer your food to another bowl or plate and dispose of the packaging—that way you are not unknowingly contaminating other areas.

"However, the likelihood of having any significant load of virus on packaging is very low."

3. Don't forget those time and temperature rules

Finally, A/Prof Cox is taking it back to food safety 101, reminding everyone of the importance of time-temperature when preparing food.

"The [virus](#), luckily, is quite temperature sensitive," he says.

"If you're still worried, cook or reheat your food to reduce the risk of transmission.

"And when you do, remember the [danger zone](#): try to keep foods above 60 degrees Celsius or below five degrees Celsius, because that's when bad

"Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold, and get perishable and cooked foods in to the fridge as soon as possible—this will minimize any risk of [food](#) becoming unsafe."

Provided by University of New South Wales

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