

7 STEPS F&B COMPANIES SHOULD TAKE TO PREPARE FOR COVID-19



Facts About Coronavirus

As the coronavirus continues to make headlines worldwide, North American food and beverage manufacturers must prepare for its potential impact. This isn't the first coronavirus we've seen; SARS in 2003 and MERS in 2012 have also been considered coronavirus outbreaks. The [name](#) "coronavirus" comes from the "corona" (Latin for "halo") which appears around the virus under electron microscopic examination. These illnesses are found naturally in both humans and animals. COVID-19, however, is considered a new (also referred to as "novel") coronavirus and was first discovered in late fall of 2019 in Wuhan, China.



Already, the virus has appeared to surpass the outbreak of previous coronaviruses. For instance, only [eight cases](#) of SARS were confirmed in the U.S., and just [two people](#) in the U.S. tested positive for MERS. At the time of publishing, there were [80 confirmed cases](#) of COVID-19 in the U.S. Interestingly, the patterns of transmission appear to be linked to biology more than lifestyle: while we might assume that children and teens would be more prone to contracting the virus than older individuals, [in China](#) (as of Feb. 11), only 8.2%

of the viruses were contracted by 20-somethings, while just 1.2% were by teens and .9% were by children aged nine or younger. The overwhelming majority—78% of cases—were seen in people aged 30 to 69.

78% of early cases are in people ages 30-69 years old

The virus is characterized by respiratory illness and fever. Like influenza, it can be passed via respiratory droplets and human-to-human contact. Severe symptoms, seen in roughly 20% of patients, may include an acute respiratory infection, pneumonia, kidney failure, and diarrhea. Currently, the mortality rate for the virus is about 2%. While this may not seem high, it does raise concerns when compared to the 0.1% mortality rate of the seasonal flu.

One of the challenges presented by the coronavirus is its long incubation period (the time between exposure and the onset of symptoms). Research suggests this period could span two to 14 days, and people who bear no symptoms can still spread the virus. These features have made the virus difficult to contain.

In China, [rates of the virus](#) are actually starting to fall. Here in the U.S., however, we'll likely see further evidence of transmission throughout our communities, which is why it's important for restaurants and food manufacturing facilities to begin preparing now.

The Risk of Transmission Through Food

On February 27, 2020, the FDA released a [statement](#) indicating that there were no reports to suggest that COVID-19 could be transmitted by food or food packaging. Yet, they also recommended good hygiene practices for handling and preparing foods. Moreover, [according to](#) Dr. Todd Ellerin, director of infectious diseases and vice chairman of the department of medicine at South Shore Hospital in Weymouth, MA, notes that COVID-19 and other coronaviruses have been detected in patients' stool. Thus, the possibility of food handlers transmitting the virus could not be ruled out entirely. He notes, however, that cooking food would likely kill the virus. The [Food Safety Authority of Ireland](#) (FSAI) states that heating food for at least 30 minutes at least 140°F has proven to be effective for eliminating SARS. Without a host (animal or human), the virus cannot grow, and therefore cannot proliferate in food sources.

Nonetheless, FSAI also notes that indirect transmission through contact with surfaces that an infected person has coughed or sneezed on is possible. Thus, just as with the flu, infected food handlers could still potentially pass the illness on. As of now, it appears that while transmission through food is unlikely, it cannot be ruled out as impossible.

Moreover, restaurants and food manufacturing facilities should be mindful of the probability that the virus could be passed between colleagues. Early into the SARS outbreak in 2002, [restaurant chefs](#) in the Foshan municipality in the Guangdong Province of China infected their colleagues and health care workers, but did not appear to infect any patrons.



What Food & Beverage Manufacturers Can Do About Coronavirus

It is possible COVID-19 could survive up to nine days on surfaces — its survivability could be shorter, but this conservative estimate is based on the lifespan of SARS. The good news is that regular sanitizers, including bleach and alcohol, are effective for eliminating the virus.

To address the coronavirus outbreak, there are seven key steps food and beverage companies should take:

1. Work with your supply chain. Know where your raw materials come from, and identify alternate suppliers in different regions for key ingredients if needed.
2. Enforce good handwashing and hand hygiene. Minimize the risk of spread in facilities and restaurants by encouraging employees to wash hands after changing tasks or touching their face. Have all handwashing supplies in place, along with hand sanitizing stations with 60% alcohol-based sanitizers. Washing hands thoroughly for 20 seconds and following up with this type of sanitizer can help to prevent contamination.
3. Have an employee illness reporting system in place. Alert employees of which symptoms to look for, and encourage them to stay home if they're feeling ill. Employees with a fever of 100.4 or higher and acute respiratory symptoms should not be working. Keep in mind that wearing surgical facemasks is not recommended by the CDC for healthy individuals, as there is limited evidence of efficacy.
4. Clean and sanitize. If someone does become ill at work, use bleach or alcohol to wipe down surfaces. The following cleaning agents can be left on commonly used or

DISINFECTANTS KNOWN TO KILL THE CORONAVIRUS



handled surfaces (such as countertops, workspaces, and doorknobs) for a period of one minute to kill any viruses:

- a. 62-71% ethanol
 - b. 0.5% hydrogen peroxide
 - c. 0.1% sodium hypochlorite (1:50 standard bleach solution)
5. Encourage employees to get the flu vaccine if they haven't already. While this won't protect against COVID-19, it will help to promote a healthier workforce and reduce the strain on the medical community.
 6. Consider your workforce planning. If absences occur, do you have employees who are cross-trained to fill critical roles?
 7. Reach out to local and state health departments. Ask them which steps should be taken if a case were identified in your workforce.

Currently, it is safe to receive packages from areas that have experienced outbreaks, including China, as the survivability period on surfaces is nine days and transit generally takes longer than that. However, if we start to see more widespread community outbreaks in the U.S., food companies may need to begin considering sanitization steps for incoming products. Reach out to suppliers to see what they're doing to prepare. Keep in mind that while we have strong health surveillance systems in the U.S., other areas may not have the same practices in place.

Fortunately, the risk of transmission through food remains very low; the coronavirus has a greater person-to-person risk. Workers in restaurant settings should thus be particularly careful about preventing any spread of illness. In general, however, we don't think of spreading the virus in the same way we think about microbial contaminants, such as E. coli and salmonella. Instead, the virus is similar to influenza in that employee health and hygiene remain important for controlling its spread.

About Dr. Ben Miller

This information was provided by the presenter for our February 2020 FSMA Friday webinar, Ben Miller, PhD, Senior Director of Food Safety for The Acheson Group. Dr. Miller has more than 20 years of industry experience in public health, food regulation, and food safety management. He is the Division Director of the Food and Feed Safety Division at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and an epidemiologist at the Minnesota Department of Health.



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