



COVID-19 Food Safety FAQs

Revised July 7, 2020

The Maryland Department of Health (MDH) is committed to ensuring the safety and availability of Maryland’s food supply during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) public health emergency. This interim guidance highlights actions taken at the federal and State levels to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 as it relates to food service facilities and the food supply. Per Governor Hogan’s [Executive Order 20-06-10-01](#) - effective June 12th - food service establishments may serve food and beverages to customers in indoor seating areas.

MDH understands that many Marylanders will be either cooking at home more, ordering food online through meal delivery services, or picking up carry-out meals from their favorite local food businesses. When preparing, ordering, or receiving food, always remember to follow the [4 Steps to Food Safety](#) - clean, separate, cook, and chill – to prevent foodborne illness.

MDH is aware that Maryland residents have questions about food, food safety, and the COVID-19 illness as related to food. Please find below a list of questions we have received and our responses to those questions. Businesses should also see the FAQs available on the Business Express website, <https://businessexpress.maryland.gov/coronavirus>, and the Maryland Back to Business website, <https://open.maryland.gov/backtobusiness/>, for more information.

Additionally, if you have a specific food safety question that is not answered below, or you cannot find the answer on any of the following links, please call 410-767-8401 and the Office of Food Protection staff will work to provide you an answer.

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Employee Illness

What are restaurants doing to prevent COVID-19 transmission?

Restaurants have been advised to screen employees for symptoms daily and to prevent ill and exposed employees from working. Foodborne exposure to COVID-19 is not currently thought to be a route of transmission, but patrons should still wash their hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water before and after meals. Restaurants have also been directed to make sure people are spaced apart when dining or picking up food.

What should a food establishment do if one of their employees is diagnosed with COVID-19?

Food establishments and other businesses should review the [CDC's interim guidance for businesses and employers](#) and the information on [Maryland's Business Express](#) website for planning and responding to coronavirus disease.

All food establishments should have clear policies on illness and COVID-19. No employee or manager should work if ill. Employees and managers should check themselves for symptoms of COVID-19 (fever, cough, shortness of breath, chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, and new loss of taste or smell). All employees should notify their supervisor and stay home if they are sick. Food establishments that are concerned about the possibility of transmission within their own facility because of multiple COVID-19 infections in their employees should contact their local health department.

What should I do if an employee at a food processing plant tests positive for COVID-19 or is potentially exposed?

Employee tested positive for COVID-19

There is no requirement to close a food processing plant in the event an employee tests positive for COVID-19. Please see the FDA guidance: [What to Do if You Have COVID-19 Confirmed Positive or Exposed Workers](#) and CDC guidance: [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) - Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers](#) for more information. If the plant is a meat/poultry processing facility, see CDC guidance: [Guidance for Meat and Poultry Processing Workers and Employers](#).

Employee Potentially Exposed

Some critical infrastructure employees (such as food workers) may continue working if he/she has potentially been exposed: [Updated Interim Guidance For Employers And Businesses On Management Of Critical Infrastructure Workers With Possible Exposure To Covid-19](#).

How should restaurants, bars, and social clubs screen employees?

Restaurants, bars, and social clubs should follow [CDC guidelines](#) for screening employees. In addition, the following questions may be asked when an employee reports to work:

- Have you had ANY of the following symptoms of COVID-19 infection in the last 14 days:
 - Fever or chills; Cough, shortness of breath, or difficulty breathing; Fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, or diarrhea; New loss of taste or smell
- Is there anyone in your immediate household with COVID-19 infection or have you had close contact (less than 6 feet for at least 15 minutes) with anyone with COVID-19 infection in the past 14 (fourteen) days, without the use of personal protective equipment?
- Have you had a positive test for COVID-19 infection within the past ten (10) days? [If yes, employee may need to provide additional medical documentation to work.]

Temperature checks are not required, but employees should be encouraged to self-monitor for symptoms of COVID-19, including daily temperature checks before going to work.

Cleaning and Sanitizing

What kind of cleaning should food service establishments and food manufacturers do?

The CDC is encouraging routine environmental cleaning for businesses. [Click here for more guidance and information](#). Additional sanitation steps are not recommended in the event of an employee that appears ill. The CDC provides general cleaning and disinfection guidelines [here](#). The FDA has emphasized the need to maintain clean and sanitized facilities, including food contact surfaces, and food facilities may want to consider a more frequent cleaning schedule.

[Products with EPA-approved emerging viral pathogens claims](#) are expected to be effective against COVID-19 based on data for harder to kill viruses. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for all cleaning and disinfection products (e.g., concentration, application method and contact time, etc.). **Check the product label guidelines for if and where these disinfectant products are safe and recommended for use in food manufacturing areas or food establishments.**

When preparing food in your home or business, are there additional practices needed to ensure the spread of the virus is minimized?

Use this opportunity to practice food safety by frequent cleaning of food contact and non-food contact surfaces and proper handwashing.

- Continue to regularly clean and sanitize any objects or surfaces that are frequently touched by workers or household members.
- Follow safe food handling practices, keep food items cold or hot as required, and include frequent hand washing with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds.
- Keep food preparation stations at least 6 feet apart.

Food Supply and Food Safety

Can food be self-served in a buffet or soup or salad bar?

No, food may not be served in a buffet format where the customers are serving themselves. This includes, but is not limited to, hot/cold bars, salad bars, soup bars, and toppings bars.

Can a buffet-style line or station be used if employees are serving the food?

Food may be served in a buffet-style line or station (also called cafeteria style) when:

- food is served directly by the employee,
- a procedure is in place to ensure customers in line are at least 6 feet away from each other, and
- a barrier is provided to protect the serving employee(s) from the customers if social distancing cannot be maintained.

Food establishments should provide signage of proper procedures for customers, including face covering use when not at their table eating or drinking and visiting the restrooms. Signage should be provided in appropriate languages.

Are there any restrictions for catered events?

Catered food service events are allowed. Caterers must comply with the applicable occupancy restrictions, social distancing requirements, and table limits for the venue. Please see [Executive Order 20-06-10-01](#) and any other applicable local or Executive Orders in effect for that type of venue. For more information, please see the [Social Gathering Limit FAQs](#).

All venues are strongly recommended to follow the most current guidance from CDC and MDH regarding social distancing, including avoidance of large gatherings and crowded places. In addition, please also check with the local health department for any additional restrictions or requirements.

Are caterers restricted as to how food may be served at an event?

Yes. Caterers must follow the same requirements for serving food as all other food service establishments, including not serving food in a self-serve buffet format. Instead, consider serving food plated, cafeteria style, or to a table family style.

Can foods and beverages be self-served from a display case or beverage station?

Yes. Pre-packaged foods may be sold in grab-and-go or display cases to eliminate the need for shared serving utensils. For foods not prepackaged, deli tissue or other food grade single-use service items must be provided. High touch surfaces should be cleaned frequently, and disinfecting wipes can be provided to customers. Provide single-use deli tissues, napkins, etc. for customers to use when opening displays, handling carafes and other items at beverage stations, or for other high-touch surfaces that cannot be eliminated. Consider providing signage

for customers on how to safely serve themselves.

Will temporary food service facility licenses be issued?

Vendors should contact the local health department for information regarding temporary events and temporary food service facility licensure. All events should follow CDC and MDH guidance regarding COVID-19 precautions.

Can my wholesale food business be modified to serve the general public (retail food sales)?

Businesses will need to make the following arrangements:

1. The firm must notify the local health department to inquire if it will need a food service facility license to do this type of operation on a temporary basis;
2. Customers may order food via phone or from a website online;
3. Orders must be packed and staged in a refrigerated facility or trailer at the distribution center that is accessible only by firm employees;
4. Customers will pick up orders in a drive-thru fashion, and workers will pull orders from the refrigerated facility or refrigerated trailer;
5. Precautions must be taken by workers to minimize contact with the public; and
6. Customers shall not be allowed entry into the warehouse or to congregate while waiting for orders to be filled.

Should retail food businesses and delivery drivers be wearing gloves and masks?

Per Governor Hogan's [Executive Order 20-04-15](#), all staff of retail establishments shall wear a face covering while working in areas open to the general public and areas in which interactions with other staff are likely; and all food service establishments shall require staff who interact with customers (including, without limitation, delivery personnel) to wear, and those staff shall wear, face coverings while working. The CDC has provided detailed instructions on how to construct cloth [face masks](#) out of commonly available items. In addition, the FDA has published guidance on [Best Practices for Retail Food Stores, Restaurants, and Food Pick-Up/Delivery Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). Glove use is only required for food handlers to prevent bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat foods.

Do staff in food service establishments have to wear face coverings in the rear cooking and preparation areas of a restaurant if not interacting with customers?

Yes, all food service establishments shall require all staff to wear face coverings unless it is not safe to do so, as defined in the Face Coverings Order (Executive Order 20-04-15-01). See also: [Executive Order 20-06-10-01](#) and [MDH Order 2020-06-10-01](#).

In hot environments, facial coverings may be more difficult to wear. Staff should stay hydrated and take breaks to prevent overheating. The food service establishment may implement alternative measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission, including greater physical distancing or barriers.

For more information on mask use, please see the CDC's guidance on face coverings: [Use Cloth Face Coverings to Help Slow Spread](#). The Maryland [Business Express](#) website has additional information for businesses.

Can staff in food service establishments wear a face shield instead of a facial covering?

No. A face shield would not be an adequate substitute for a facial covering because it does not filter fine particles, and thus may not offer the same degree of protection to the wearer and others as an appropriate facial covering. It can be used in conjunction with facial coverings as an additional precaution but should not be used instead of or in replacement of a facial covering/mask unless there is a legitimate reason why the employee can not physically wear a facial covering, such as a medical condition that prevents use of a facial covering, or if its use would create a hazardous condition.

An employee could wear a face shield without a covering/mask IF there is absolutely no interaction with other staff or customers. Once they leave their work station they must put a facial covering on. If other staff/customers walk within 6 feet of the employee or the employee is working in a high traffic area, a facial covering must be worn.

Can mobile food trucks continue to operate?

Yes. [Executive Order 20-06-10-01](#) does not prohibit food truck operation. However, food truck operators must be careful to avoid clustering multiple food trucks together, provide instructions for social distancing for their customers, reduce the opportunity for gatherings of more than 10 people, and prevent crowds. Example signs and additional resources may be found [here](#).

Can Cottage Foods businesses operate during COVID-19?

Yes. [Executive Order 20-06-10-01](#) does not prohibit cottage food business operation.

Are Farmers Markets allowed to continue to operate?

Yes. Farmers markets are allowed to operate. Guidance and requirements for the safe operation of farmers markets can be found on the Maryland Department of Agriculture website: <https://news.maryland.gov/mda/category/covid-19/>

Can food service establishments provide live entertainment?

If a facility that primarily operates as a food service facility decides to have live entertainment (including live music and karaoke), the entertainment would need to comply with the food service facility requirements, specifically regarding occupancy restrictions and face coverings. Dinner theaters may operate as a food service establishment, but are not allowed to operate as a theater, per Executive Order 20-06-10-01. Please check with your local zoning authority and health department for any other requirements or restrictions that may be applicable.

Outdoor Dining

What do food establishments need to do to be able to serve customers outdoors?

Restaurants, bars, and social clubs (including American Legion posts, VFW posts, and Elks Clubs) with dining facilities are required to comply with the Governor's [Executive Order 20-05-27-01](#), as well as any additional requirements established by the local government authorities and any other applicable laws. [Guidance and best practices](#) are also available to assist restaurants with safely resuming outdoor operations.

Restaurants and Bars and Social Clubs that serve food and beverages to customers in outdoor areas shall:

1. require all staff to wear Face Coverings, in accordance with the Face Coverings Order;
2. ensure patrons are seated at least six feet away from each other, except for households seated together;
3. not allow groups larger than six persons to be seated together, except members of the same household;
4. not serve food in a buffet format; and
5. clean and disinfect each table between each seating in accordance with CDC and MDH guidelines, using cleaning products that meet the criteria of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for use against COVID-19.

Are restaurants limited in the capacity of their outdoor seating?

Restaurants must still adhere to the [Executive Order 20-05-27-01](#) requiring social distancing by keeping patrons (not just tables) at least 6 feet apart, except for households or groups seated together. No more than 6 people may be seated together.

Can customers still use indoor restrooms?

Yes, customers who are seated outside may still use indoor restrooms. The facility should implement procedures (including floor markings and signage) to ensure that customers do not congregate around the restrooms. Restrooms should be cleaned frequently, and soap and water, hand sanitizer, and disposable hand towels should be provided. For more information, see the [Guidance and Best Practices for Restaurants](#).

What counts as “indoor” versus “outdoor”? Can tents be used? What about buildings with large garage doors that can be opened?

Overhead tents, canopies, and coverings may be used so long as they do not constitute an “indoor area,” as defined in [COMAR 10.19.04.02B\(9\)](#):

“Indoor area” means all space in a structure or building with a ceiling that is enclosed on all sides by any combination of permanent or temporary walls, windows, or doorways, whether open or closed, or other physical barriers extending from floor to the ceiling.

Can the street outside a restaurant be closed to provide more outdoor seating area?

Contact your local department of public works and/or local law enforcement to inquire about road closures. Do not set up outdoor seating on any public space (including parks, public parking spaces, roads, or sidewalks) without the express permission of your local government authorities.

My restaurant did not previously have outdoor seating. Can I add outdoor seating now?

The Governor's [Executive Order 20-05-27-01](#) does not prohibit restaurants, bars, and social clubs from adding new outdoor seating. If you are adding outdoor seating, check with your [local health department](#) and other local authorities first to ensure compliance with all requirements, including any applicable licenses or permits. Local jurisdictions may expand opportunities for outdoor dining by allowing for the closing of streets and expanding into parking lots and public outdoor spaces.

Can physical barriers be used between tables instead of keeping them 6 feet apart?

Patrons must be seated at least 6 feet away from each other, except for households or groups seated together, regardless of the use of physical barriers.

Are restaurants required to use disposable utensils and servingware?

This is not a requirement in the Executive Order. The Department recommends that when possible, employees should place the table settings after the party is seated and wear gloves when removing food service items and wash their hands immediately afterwards. Restaurants, bars, and social clubs should limit multi-use items, especially if they are difficult to clean and sanitize between use. Provide condiments in either single use containers or disinfected manufacturer packaging, and use menu boards, disposable menus, or mobile apps for ordering. If a facility uses reusable menus, they should be cleaned and sanitized between each customer's use.

When do outdoor diners need to wear face coverings?

Outdoor diners must wear face coverings when entering or exiting the facility, at all times when inside the facility, and whenever interacting with staff or other patrons outside. Face coverings are generally recommended at all times, except when eating or drinking.

Indoor Dining

What do food service establishments need to do to be able to serve customers indoors?

Please see [MDH Order 2020-06-20-01](#) and [Executive Order 20-06-10-01](#) for the requirements for food service establishments to serve customers indoors, which include but are not limited to:

- requiring all staff to wear Face Coverings, in accordance with the Face Coverings Order;
- ensuring patrons are seated at least six feet away from each other (including in bar areas), except for households or groups seated together;
- not allowing groups larger than six persons to be seated together;
- not serving food in a buffet format; and
- cleaning and disinfecting each table between each seating in accordance with CDC and MDH guidelines, using cleaning products that meet the criteria of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for use against COVID-19.

Please also check with your local health department for any additional restrictions or requirements.

Are restaurants limited in the capacity of their indoor seating?

Yes, restaurants may not exceed 50% of the facility's maximum capacity.

Do customers have to wear face coverings in food service establishments?

Yes, food service establishments shall require its customers and visitors over the age of 9 to wear face coverings indoors, except while eating or drinking.

Resources:

- Maryland Department of Health Office of Food Protection:
 - <https://phpa.health.maryland.gov/OEHFP/OFPCHS/Pages/Food-Safety-and-Covid19.aspx>
- Governor Hogan's COVID-19 Response:
 - <https://governor.maryland.gov/coronavirus/>
- Maryland Department of Health COVID-19:
 - <https://coronavirus.maryland.gov/>
- MDH Directives and Orders:
 - <https://coronavirus.maryland.gov/pages/cdc-resources>
- Visit the FDA's website for more information and FAQs for food products:
 - [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) Frequently Asked Questions](#)
 - [Food Safety and the Coronavirus Disease 2019](#)
 - [Retail Food Protection: Employee Health and Personal Hygiene Handbook](#)
- Additional information for retail food establishments, including a fact sheet in English and Spanish, can be found on the National Restaurant Association's website:
 - [Coronavirus Information and Resources](#)
- Guidance from CDC for businesses:
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/businesses-employers.html>
- Guidance from WHO for businesses:
 - <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf>
- Additional information for businesses on planning for and responding to coronavirus disease is available on Maryland's Business Express website:
 - <https://businessexpress.maryland.gov/coronavirus>
- Resources for businesses, including example signage:
 - <https://coronavirus.maryland.gov/pages/business-resources>
- Maryland Back to Business (guidance and best practices)
 - <https://open.maryland.gov/backtobusiness/>