



COVID-19 Food Safety FAQs

Revised October 1, 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. Food service establishments may serve food and beverages to customers in accordance with the Governor's [Executive Order](#), [MDH orders](#), and any additional requirements or restrictions from the [local jurisdiction](#).

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 COVID19 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 visit <https://phpa.health.maryland.gov/oehfp/ofpchs/pages/home.aspx> to submit your question using the [Questions form](#) 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 foodservice 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](#), the FDA's guidance on [What to Do if You Have COVID-19 Confirmed Positive or Exposed Workers](#), and the information on [Maryland's Business Express](#) website for planning and responding to coronavirus disease. Foodservice establishments are not required to close if an employee tests positive for COVID-19, unless directed to do so by a State or local agency. They are also not required to report individual COVID-19 illnesses to the State or local health department, unless they choose to do so, as discussed below.

All food establishments should have clear policies on illness and COVID-19. No employee or manager should work if ill with possible symptoms of COVID-19 or if they have been directed to quarantine due to a possible exposure. Employees and managers should check themselves daily 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 among their employees should contact their local health department.

As part of the contact tracing process, laboratory test results for all Marylanders are automatically reported to the State. If the contact tracing process identifies the possibility of multiple contacts or exposures within a facility, the local health department may contact the establishment and may determine whether additional measures could be taken to reduce the possibility of spread within the facility.

Employees who are told they are a close contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case should quarantine according to [CDC guidance](#). For more information, please see MDH's [Frequently Asked Questions about Isolation and Quarantine](#).

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 MDH [FAQ on Isolation and Quarantine](#) and the FDA guidance: [What to Do if You Have COVID-19 Confirmed Positive or Exposed Workers](#) and CDC guidance: [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID19\) - 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

If an employee is determined to be a close contact, the employee should self-quarantine at home. For more information, please see MDH's [Frequently Asked Questions about Isolation and Quarantine](#). In a limited number of cases, if the business is listed as critical infrastructure, and if the employee is essential for the continued operation of the business, the employer should contact the local health department to discuss potential strategies that may allow the employer to continue working, while complying with the recommendations of the CDC guidance on critical infrastructure workers (see [Updated Interim Guidance For Employers And Businesses On Management Of Critical Infrastructure Workers With Possible Exposure To CovidCOVID-19](#)). This determination should be made by a local health department and will depend on the circumstances and extent of exposure and illness within the facility.

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

Restaurants, bars, and social clubs should follow [CDC guidelines](#) for screening employees. In addition, consult the [CDC guidance on screening questions for 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 foodservice establishments and food manufacturers do?**

Food service establishments are required to 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](#). **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.** Follow the manufacturer's instructions for all cleaning and disinfection products (e.g., concentration, application method and contact time, etc.).

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.

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.

Foodservice Establishment Operations

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 20-09-28-01](#) 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 mobile food trucks continue to operate?

Yes. [Executive Order 20-09-28-01](#) 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 food businesses operate during COVID-19?

Yes. [Executive Order 20-09-28-01](#) 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 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.

Who needs to wear a face covering in a foodservice establishment?

Face coverings are not required while consuming food or beverages.

When indoors, face coverings are required for all employees and guests, including children older than 5 years of age.

When outdoors, face coverings are required if unable to consistently maintain at least six feet of distance from other non-household individuals, including when not seated at a table and when interacting with staff. Face coverings are advisable under all conditions.

For exceptions to this requirement, please see [Executive Order 20-09-28-01](#). Customers with disabilities who are unable to wear a face covering must be provided with an opportunity to receive the same goods and services as customers without disabilities. For more information, please see the [FAQ on Face Coverings](#).

Examples of reasonable accommodation include, but are not limited to, providing take-out, curbside pick-up, or delivery in lieu of seated dining. Provide signage with ADA-accessible ways to contact the facility to request reasonable accommodations. Do not require proof or documentation of an individual's disability.

Staff are only required to use gloves to prevent bare-hand contact with ready to eat foods.

Can staff in foodservice establishments wear a face shield instead of a face covering?

In the Governor's [Executive Order 20-09-28-01](#), face coverings include cloth face coverings and full-face shields. Cloth face coverings are recommended by both CDC and the Maryland Department of Health to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Face shields are acceptable face coverings. However, MDH strongly recommends, but does not require, also wearing a cloth face covering if using a face shield.

Employees or staff that cannot wear a face covering due to a disability may request reasonable accommodations in accordance with the employer's disability policies and procedures (ADA Title I - https://www.ada.gov/ada_title_i.htm).

For more information, please see the [FAQs on Face Coverings](#).

Can customers bring food or beverages into a retail store or other facility to avoid having to wear a face covering?

Facilities may adopt policies requiring customers to continuously wear a face covering or to not consume food or beverages while within the facility, even if the food or beverage was purchased within the facility (such as a coffee shop located within a retail or grocery store). If consuming food and beverages is allowed within the facility (or designated area of the facility), the face covering can be removed briefly to take a sip or bite but cannot be removed for the entire duration while in the facility.

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 also resume operations as of 5pm September 4, 2020, per [Executive Order 20-09-28-01](#), at the lesser of 50% maximum capacity or 100 persons (indoors) or 250 persons (outdoors). Please check with your local zoning authority and health department for any other requirements or restrictions that may be applicable.

What should foodservice establishments do to maintain physical distancing?

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. This is the distance between patrons - tables may need to be spaced further apart based on the seating arrangement. Patrons must be seated at least 6 feet away from each other in the bar area.

Indoors, every other booth should be closed if six feet distancing between patrons cannot be maintained. Outdoor booths may, as an alternative to closing every other booth, install a plexiglass shield (or similar impermeable physical barrier) between booths. The plexiglass

shield must be able to prevent persons in adjacent booths from any physical contact while either seated or standing (height of at least 6 feet from the floor to the top of the shield).

No more than six people may be seated together as a group at a table.

Establish a six foot marking system to visually demonstrate the recommended distancing at all locations where customers and staff congregate, including immediately outside the facility where lines may form and at carry-out pick up areas. If the bar area is used to fulfill carry-out orders, designate an area that is at least six feet away from seated patrons at the bar.

The total capacity of an indoor foodservice establishment may not exceed 75% of the maximum capacity, as defined in [Executive Order 20-09-28-01](#), including staff. The capacity may be additionally limited in order to maintain physical distancing. Outdoor seating is not limited so long as physical distancing requirements are met.

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.

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 20-09-28-01](#) 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.

Resources:

Maryland Department of Health Office of Food Protection:

- <https://phpa.health.maryland.gov/OEHFP/OFPCHS/Pages/Food-Safety-andCovid19.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/2019ncov/community/organizations/businesses-employers.html>

Guidance from WHO for businesses:

- <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplaceready-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/>