

Extension Answers COVID-19 Food & Family FAQs

Information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, World Health Organization, local health departments, and land-grant universities provide scientific information. N.C. Cooperative Extension is a source of information provided by N.C. State University and N.C. A. & T. University in partnership with the county government to serve local communities. Please also be aware that Johnston County has a COVID-19 hotline available for the public to ask questions by calling 919-989-5400.

In the beginning of this crisis, grocery stores were bombarded with anxious shoppers fearing the worst. As a result of many consumer fears, the Food Safety team at N.C. State University and N.C. Cooperative Extension developed a variety of food safety resources related to the virus. That information can be found on our website at www.johnston.ces.ncsu.edu or www.go.ncsu.edu/covid-19.

One of the top concerns of many people during this time is the risk of contracting COVID-19 at the grocery store. Many stores are modifying their operations in order to combat the spread of the COVID-19. Behind the scenes, staff are cleaning and sanitizing as much as possible. We know that COVID-19 can continue to exist on surfaces for hours to days, but what about on food packaging? According to the CDC there is no indication that food packaging material has served in significant connection to transmission of the virus. Below are additional consumer questions answered.

“What about handling produce? Should I still buy fresh produce?”

Absolutely, you should continue to buy fruits and vegetables! Fruits and vegetables help keep your body as healthy as possible through proper nourishment. You may consider using hand sanitizer before and after handling the produce and avoid touching items you do not plan to purchase. Whether we are in a crisis or not, you should always wash your fresh produce before eating- and always wash your hands before eating!

“What steps should I take to minimize the risk when shopping at the grocery store?”

You may choose to wash your hands or use sanitizer before entering and after leaving the store. Maintain social distancing as much as possible while shopping. Avoid touching items you do not intend to purchase.

“Should I wear a mask when shopping at the grocery store?”

According to the CDC masks are not recommended as a protective measure. Before you stop reading, hear me out!

Social distancing is recommended as a protective measure for the general public. Social distancing reduces the risk of getting sick from aerosolized respiratory droplets. In healthcare settings, providers are not able to practice social distancing. Because they cannot practice social distancing, they must protect themselves as best they can. The CDC does not recommend consumers wear masks. If you are sick, you should stay home. If you are healthy, practice social distancing and only go out for necessities in order to slow the spread. In addition to the CDC's

recommendation of social distancing over wearing a mask, it is important to discuss their statement regarding homemade masks. Again, to be clear, only healthcare providers are recommended to wear masks because they can't practice social distancing. In a healthcare setting, the CDC informs that homemade masks are not considered personal protective equipment (PPE). As a last resort, healthcare providers who use homemade masks should couple the mask with a face shield covering the entire front and sides of the face as the capability of homemade masks to protect healthcare providers is unknown.

“What should I do at home to keep my family safe?”

Keep in mind that COVID-19 can remain viable for hours to days on surfaces; the CDC recommends cleaning and sanitizing surfaces. Cleaning and sanitizing are two different steps. Cleaning is like brushing your teeth- you clean off the residue and “dirty stuff.” Sanitizing is like using mouthwash, this is the step to kill off microbes on surfaces. The CDC recommends using diluted household bleach solutions, alcohol solutions of at least 70% solutions, and compounds on the EPA-recommended list (go.ncsu.edu/epacovid-19). To dilute bleach, mix 1/3 cup of bleach per gallon of water or 4 teaspoons bleach per quart of water. Be sure to use bleach that has been opened no longer than 30 days, and prepare the solution in a well-ventilated area.

“Is COVID-19 a concern with getting takeout?”

There is no current indication that takeout or drive-thru meals increase your risk. Those are great options for managing the risk as it helps to maintain social distancing and reduce the number of things being touched. Foods delivered to the home also fit within this grouping.

“Can I get COVID-19 from touching food packaging exposed to Coronavirus?”

The risk is very low, based on current research. To further minimize your risk, wash your hands after handling the packaging.

“What happens if you ingest Coronavirus through food?”

Coronaviruses are generally thought to be spread through person-to-person contact through respiratory droplets. Currently, there is no evidence to support transmission of the virus directly by eating food that might inadvertently contain the virus. The best thing to do is continue to wash your hands.

“Can I get COVID-19 from my reusable grocery bag?”

Reusable bags have not been identified as a risk factor and should not be banned from stores. On the other hand, reusable bags should be cleaned and disinfected to prevent foodborne illness from raw produce and animal products. For nylon and plastic bags, clean and wash both the inside and outside of the bag with soap and water; disinfect using a diluted bleach solution (see dilution recommendations above) or an EPA-recommended disinfectant. Cloth reusable bags should be washed in warm water with laundry detergent and dried on the warmest setting possible.

If you have questions regarding COVID-19 and food safety, please call the Johnston County Cooperative Extension Office at 919-989-5380. If you have general COVID-19 questions,

Johnston County has launched a COVID-19 Hotline (919-989-5400). N.C. State University Food Safety resources are updated daily. Please refer to our resources for more information at www.go.ncsu.edu/covid-19.