COVID-19 Guidance for Food Stores

COVID-19 is an infection caused by a new type of coronavirus. COVID-19 can present as an acute respiratory illness in humans. The virus is spread mainly from person-to-person through close contact. More information on COVID-19 can be found in the Toronto Public Health COVID-19 Fact Sheet.

Food stores are deemed essential businesses as they provide safe and reliable access to food, beverages and consumer products necessary to maintain households and businesses. With current community transmission of COVID-19 in Toronto, food stores, including grocery stores, supermarkets and pharmacies, should adjust operations to help prevent the transmission of COVID-19.

Recommendations for owners and operators of food stores, including grocery stores, supermarkets and pharmacies:

Conduct screening of staff to prevent the spread of COVID-19:

- All staff should be aware of the signs and symptoms of COVID-19, including:
  - fever
  - cough
  - muscle aches and tiredness
  - difficulty breathing
  - and less commonly: sore throat, headache, diarrhea
- Require staff who are sick to stay home:
  - Staff who have symptoms of acute respiratory illness must stay home, and not attend work until they are symptom-free for at least 24 hours.
  - Staff who have travelled outside of Canada must stay home, and self-isolate for 14 days after returning to Canada.
    - Visit our website to learn about assessment centres, and to help determine if further health care is required.
- Remind staff about the importance of reporting illness to their supervisor/manager.
- Provide attendance and sick leave policies and procedures that compensate staff for staying home if they are sick.
- Stay up to date with information about COVID-19 on the Toronto Public Health website.

Increase communication with customers and staff:

- Post signs at all entrances instructing customers and staff not to enter or visit if they are sick.
- Post educational materials to encourage behaviours to prevent transmission such as:
  - Physical Distancing
  - How to Protect Yourself
  - Information about COVID-19
  - Wash your Hands
  - Cover your Cough
- Provide frequent reminders over the public announcement (PA) system to customers about physical distancing and any other key messaging (e.g. sanitizing hands at entrance, stay home if feeling ill, no gathering/crowding in one area, ensure two metres/six feet apart in line-ups).
- Information can also be communicated on the stores website, and through automated telephone messages, newsprint and e-mail subscriptions.

**Implement measures to ensure physical distancing:**

Physical distancing refers to the practice of avoiding close contact by keeping a distance of 2 metres (6 feet) from others. Strategies to ensure physical distancing among customers and staff can include:

- Limit the number of customers permitted into the store at a time:
  - Position an employee at the entrance to control customer entry.
  - Monitor the number of people entering and leaving the store.
  - Stagger entry into the store.
  - Once the maximum number of customers is reached, allow one person in for every person that leaves.
    - To calculate the maximum number of people that should be permitted in the store at any one time, a good rule of thumb is one person per two metres square (four squared metres) of retail floor space.
  - Post signage at the entrance indicating the maximum number of customers that can be permitted at any one time.
- Provide visible queues for customers who might be waiting in line outside the store by placing markers such as tape, safety cones/pylons or painted lines every two metres/six feet.
- Recommend that families designate one person to do the shopping, where possible.
- Maintain physical distancing between people within the store:
  - Design a shopping flow for the whole store (e.g. creating one-way aisles with prominent signage and/or floor markings).
  - Place tape on the floor two metres/six feet apart for lining up at service counters (e.g. cashiers, meat/deli).
  - Assign an employee to direct customers to the cashier as they become available.
- Utilize other measures in areas where physical distancing is difficult to maintain:
  - Set-up portable barriers around employees when restocking (e.g. produce carts).
  - Install plexi-glass dividers at cashiers or any other service counter where staff are required to be in close contact with customers.
  - Consider staggering the number cashier stations open at any given time (e.g. every other station is used).

**Support and encourage proper hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette:**

- Educate staff and customers on proper hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette.
- Provide alcohol-based hand sanitizer in dispensers near entrances, service counters and other high-touch locations for customer and staff use. Monitor and refill as needed.
- Avoid touching your face, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Post [Cover your Cough, Hand Washing](https://www.toh.on.ca) and [Hand Sanitizing](https://www.toh.on.ca) signage in visible locations.
Practice proper glove use:
- Glove use is not a substitute for proper hand hygiene. If staff use gloves, it is important to change them every hour, or more often, as necessary.
  - Hands should be washed and/or sanitized between changes.
  - Remove gloves when changing tasks.
  - When gloves are removed, new gloves must be used each time.

Modify cashier stations and transactions:
- Provide clean carry-out bags for purchased food and grocery products.
- Customers that bring their own reusable bags or boxes should package their own purchases.
- Encourage electronic payment by debit or credit card, and tap instead of pin pad use where possible.
  - Limit the handling of credit cards and loyalty cards, wherever possible.
  - Consider using one cashier for cash payments.
- Avoid using grocery dividers on conveyor belts at cashier stations where possible. Consider single use disposable dividers or direct customers to leave a space. If re-usable dividers are used, they should be cleaned and disinfected after each use between customers.
- Limit the number of items per customer for essential products to prevent hoarding.

Implement measures to protect food, packaging and utensils from contamination:
- There is currently no evidence of COVID-19 being transmitted through food. However, food should be protected from contamination at all times, as outlined in the Ontario Food Premises Regulation.
- Suspend accepting product returns and do not put returned items back on the shelves.
- Pre-package bulk food items (e.g. buns, pastries, candies) or use gravity feed bins where possible. If not possible, scoop/utensils used for food should be replaced every two hours, or as often as necessary, and be cleaned and sanitized. Alternatively, designate a staff member to assist customers scoop their items.
- Do not provide food samples to customers.
- In the event that a case of COVID-19 is reported in a staff member or customer, it is not necessary for the store to discard any food that they may have been in contact with.

Consider vulnerable populations:
- Consider designating the first hour of operation for customers from vulnerable populations (e.g. seniors, people with underlying medical conditions).
- Offer online or telephone food and grocery orders with contactless delivery or pick up services as alternatives to shopping in person.

Enhance environmental cleaning and disinfection protocols:
- Enhance cleaning and disinfection policies and procedures.
- Cleaning refers to the removal of dirt and organic material from surfaces. Cleaning alone does not kill or deactivate germs.
- Disinfecting works by using chemicals to kill/deactivate germs on surfaces. This process does not work effectively if surfaces are not cleaned first.
Disinfectants should have a Drug Identification Number (DIN). A DIN is an 8-digit number given by Health Canada that confirms it is approved for use in Canada. Check the expiry dates of products you use, and always follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Chlorine bleach solutions may be used for disinfection if appropriate for the surface.
- Prepare chlorine bleach solutions according to the instructions on the label or in a ratio of:
  - 1 teaspoon (5 mL) bleach per cup (250 mL) of water, or
  - 4 teaspoons (20 mL) bleach per litre (1000 mL) of water.
- Ensure a minimum of two minutes contact time and allow to air dry.
- Prepare fresh bleach solution daily.

Educate staff on how to use cleaning agents and disinfectants:
- Required disinfectant contact times (i.e. amount of time that the product will need to remain wet on a surface to achieve disinfection).
- Safety precautions and required personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Directions for where and how to securely store cleaning and disinfectant supplies.
- Review Public Health Ontario's Cleaning and Disinfection for Public Settings fact sheet.

Designate staff to clean and disinfect high traffic areas and frequently touched surfaces and objects (e.g. freezer/cooler doors, produce carts, cashier stations, counters, hand rails).
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least twice per day, and when visibly dirty.
- Clean and disinfect debit machine pin pads after each use.
- Increase the number of shifts/hours to ensure enough time is spent cleaning and disinfecting.

Provide disinfecting wipes for wiping down handles on shopping carts and hand baskets. Monitor and refill as needed.

For cleaning and sanitizing food contract surfaces, equipment and utensils, follow standards prescribed in Ontario Food Premises Regulation. The Ontario Ministry of Health has also provided additional COVID-19 guidance for food premises.

Monitor and clean the parking lot daily and as necessary (e.g. for discarded gloves, masks, litter).

More information:
For more information, visit our website at www.toronto.ca/COVID19 or call us at 416-338-7600.

References:


