

Practicing Post-Pandemic Food Precautions

In addition to protecting diners from the risks of contaminated foods, food service operators now also have to insure safety from possible lingering coronavirus risks. It's unlikely the disease will have been completely banished by the time campuses and companies reopen.

"Consumers are developing a dramatically heightened sense of what they view as safe food handling practices and an increasing desire to know where their food comes from, how it was grown, raised and processed," a report issued by the International Foodservice Manufacturers Assn (IFMA) noted.

The good news: The virus isn't transmitted through food like hepatitis A and norovirus, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) says. The bad news is that it can be spread by anyone, food service worker or customer, just by touching, for example, countertops, handles or utensils.

Follow the Basics, Plus

Operators should "continue to follow established food safety protocols and best practices . . . and important Covid-19 recommendations," the FDA advises. "Follow the four key steps to food safety: Always Clean, Separate, Cook and Chill."

In addition, the FDA advises:

- Wash, rinse and sanitize food contact surfaces, dishware, utensils, food preparation surfaces and beverage equipment after each use.
- Frequently disinfect surfaces that are repeatedly touched by employees or customers, such as door knobs, equipment handles, work tables, counters, cashier stations and the like.
- Frequently clean and disinfect floors, and other facility access areas using EPA-registered disinfectants. ([epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2](https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2))
- Prepare and use sanitizers according to label instructions.

"May I Add Cream to Your Coffee?"

The FDA advises steps to minimize customers' risk of infection through contact while coronavirus is still active.

- Discontinue offering salad bars, buffets and beverage service stations that require customers to use common utensils or dispensers. That will require boxed salads and meals in place of self-service and manual service of beverages by employees.
- Ensure customers are spaced according to your state's or local requirements when on line at a counter or cashier station. Stores do this by laying strips of tape on the floor in aisles at intervals, at least six feet.
- Discourage customers from bringing pets into the café, except service animals (a good practice under any circumstance).

The FDA guidelines don't address un-staffed coffee pantries, but these will need attention – frequent sanitizing and maybe requiring the use of disposable gloves when people pour coffee from a carafe or pick up a snack. It might be

prudent to close the pantries while the risk of infection remains.

More Hands Needed

All these precautions may require more labor than was needed in pre-pandemic days. Whether and for how long will depend on each unit's circumstance – type of customer and service; facilities layout, and local conditions. It's likely to be a while, maybe a year, before "normal" comes back.

Meanwhile, all the standard food safety practices remain valid and important. Ensure your operator is keeping food within safe temperature zones (40°F or lower and 135°F or above), changes disposable gloves between food handling tasks and follows all other Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) practices.

Note: Actions recommended in this article are based on information published on the FDA website as of April 9. The site says, "This is not a comprehensive list. We encourage consulting the references and links provided below by CDC, FDA, EPA, and OSHA for more detailed information. This [information] will be updated as FDA receives further information and inquiries." See: www.fda.gov/food/food-safety-during-emergencies/best-practices-retail-food-stores-restaurants-and-food-pick-up-delivery-services-during-covid-19