Coronavirus and Food


Can the virus be transmitted through food?

Experience with recent acute respiratory diseases such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) suggests that people are unlikely to be infected with the virus through food, and there isn’t evidence to date of this happening with the 2019 Coronavirus (COVID-19).

Coronaviruses cannot grow in food – they need a host (animal or human) to grow in. It is believed that thorough cooking will kill the virus - we know that a heat treatment of at least 30min at 60ºC will kill the SARS virus.

Coronaviruses are most commonly passed between animals and people and from person-to-person.

The source of the COVID-19 virus is believed to be animals, but the exact source is not yet known.

The virus is commonly transmitted through direct mucous membrane contact by infectious droplets, e.g. breathing in airborne virus from the sneeze of someone who is infected, or through hand to mouth/nose contact after fingers have touched a contaminated surface.

Investigations in China are continuing to identify the source of the outbreak and ways it can be transmitted to people.

What can food handlers do?

It is possible that infected food handlers could introduce the virus to the food they are in contact with by coughing and sneezing, or through hand contact. However, this is unlikely to occur if they follow standard good personal hygiene practices that reduce the risk of transmission of most foodborne illnesses. These practices, include:

- proper hand hygiene
- safe food practices
- cough/cold hygiene practices
- avoiding close contact, when possible, with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing

Food handlers must wash hands:

- before starting work
- before handling cooked or ready-to-eat food
- after handling or preparing raw food
- after handling waste
- after cleaning duties
- after using the toilet
- after blowing nose, sneezing or coughing
- after eating drinking or smoking
- after handling money

Good hygiene and cleaning will also prevent cross contamination between raw or undercooked foods and cooked or ready-to-eat foods in the kitchen or service area.
Even if COVID-19 isn’t in New Zealand, it is important that food handlers inform their employer, avoid preparing food for other people, and seek medical advice if they think they have symptoms of respiratory illness. Similarly, if they been overseas to affected regions or in contact with persons who have, they should inform their employer and seek appropriate medical advice.

What can food business owners/managers do?

It is unlikely that COVID-19 can be transmitted through food, and there isn’t evidence to date of this happening. Usual good hygienic manufacturing practices and thorough cooking for cooked products will minimise the risk of transmission for any foodborne illness.

Notwithstanding, manufacturers (employers) still have an important role to play in preventing foodborne illness. They should:

- ensure that staff are aware of the 2019 Coronavirus issue
- ensure that you are aware of staff that have been overseas to affected regions or in contact with persons who have, and seek appropriate medical advice
- ensure that food handlers are trained appropriately in food hygiene practices appropriate to their premises
- ensure effective supervision of food handlers to reinforce hygienic practices
- ensure that appropriate facilities are provided for hand washing or sanitation (e.g. alcohol gels/wipes) to enable food handlers to practice good hygiene
- ensure that food handlers and external contractors are aware that they must report any signs/symptoms of respiratory illness before or during work
- keep vigilant and ensure that food handlers and other staff are not ill and are fit to work
- fully support staff through access to medical advice and during convalescence.

New Zealand Food Safety, in conjunction with the wider MPI, Ministry of Health and international organisations, is closely monitoring developments around the COVID-19 outbreak and will update this web page and inform the New Zealand food industry of any developments that may adversely affect the safety of New Zealand food.

Further information about COVID-19 including transmission, prevention and current status of the outbreak has been published by the New Zealand Ministry of Health and is available at: https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus