

Food systems and COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean: Health risks; safety of workers and food safety

Bulletin 4

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1. Editorial



In this new issue of the bulletin, we analyse health risks to people involved in the food system value chain – from workers to consumers – due to the COVID-19 crisis.

In this context of crisis, which affects the normal functioning of food systems' value chain, implementing measures to keep workers and consumers from contracting COVID-19 is not enough. It is also imperative to maintain high safety standards in order to keep the spread of foodborne diseases under control and thus prevent them from becoming yet another public health problem.

Therefore, all actions aimed at safeguarding the safety of workers and maintaining food safety are essential to minimize the chances of workers and consumers getting sick with COVID-19 or contracting foodborne diseases during this crisis.

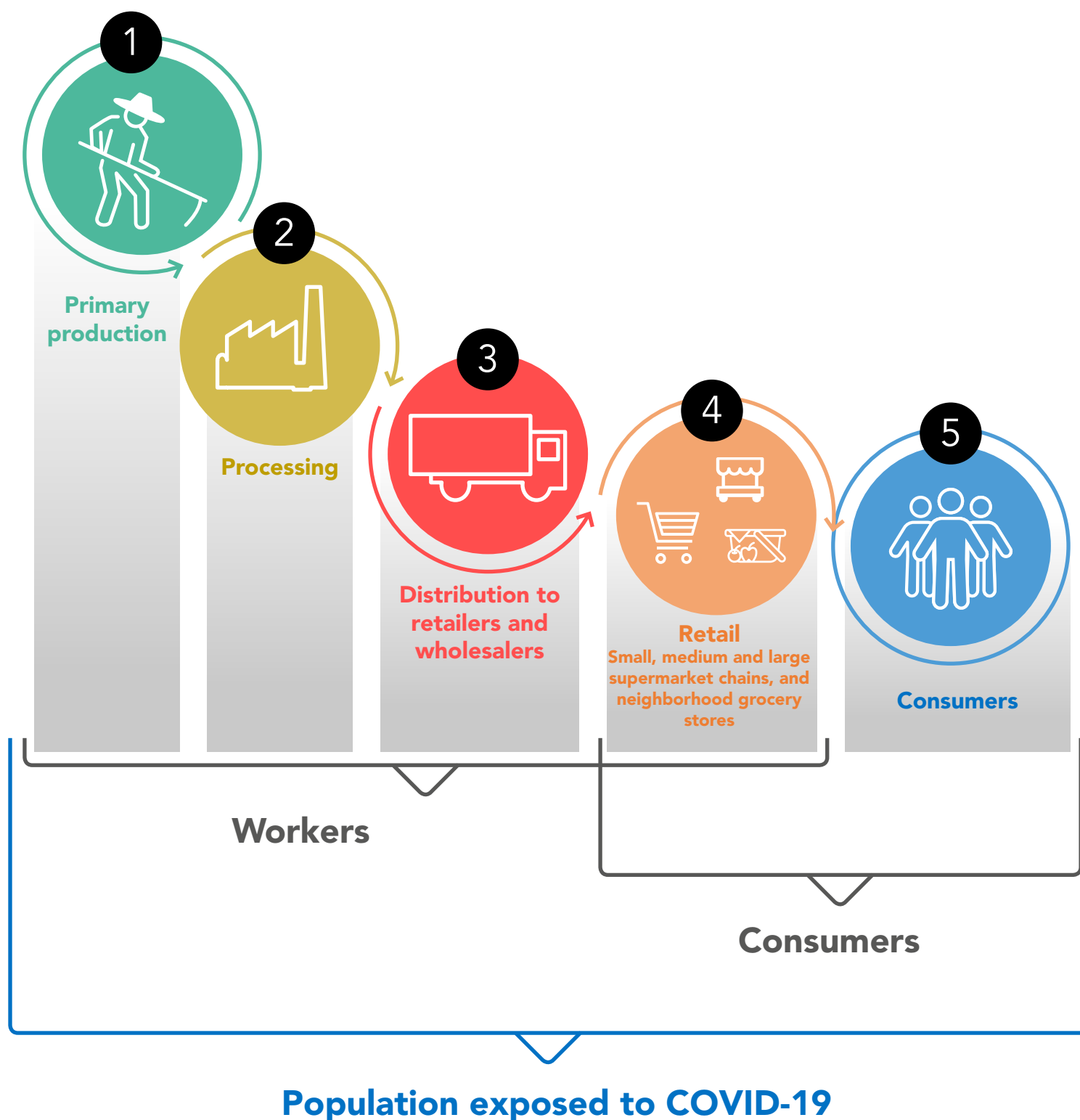


2. Risks of contracting COVID-19 for people in the food system value chain



In this section, we will assess the risks of contracting COVID-19 for people involved in the value chain of the food system. To do this, we start by identifying the population exposed throughout the chain (see Figure 1).

Figure 1/ Population exposed to COVID-19, according to their location in the value chain.



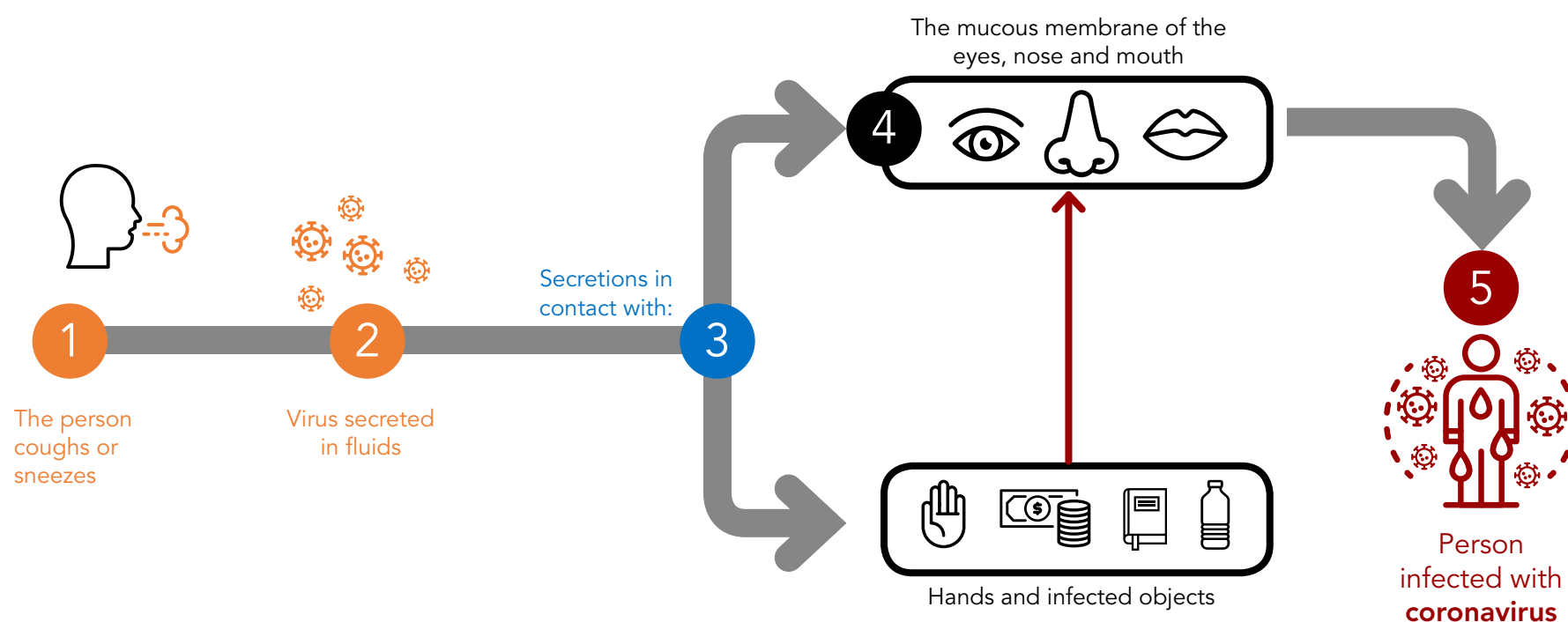
2.1. Worker exposure risk to COVID-19



Contact between people is the main source of infection

Information on the origin and routes of transmission of the virus responsible for COVID-19 is and remains scarce. However, the behaviour and characteristics of the virus can be predicted from data on similar viruses, such as those responsible for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). Given the behaviour of the above viruses, it is very unlikely that SARS-CoV-2 can be transmitted through food. That said, precautions should be taken with the packaging used to protect or preserve food.

Figura 2/ Routes of transmission of COVID-19



So far, experts have indicated that there are two main routes of infection: (i) direct contact between people, and (ii) contact with contaminated inanimate objects (fomites).¹

According to laboratory studies, the virus can survive, and maintain its infectious power on certain surfaces. The survival time varies according to surface and can be maintained for a few hours on copper objects, and up to three days on stainless steel and plastics (WHO, 2020a). It should be noted that coronaviruses cannot multiply in food, as they need an animal or human host to do so (FAO and WHO, 2020a).

Hence, in order to reduce the transmission of the disease, most countries have decided to tackle COVID-19 by implementing strict physical distancing measures, following the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020b). One of this measure's consequences is that many workers have stopped working in offices to telework from their homes. However, for the vast majority of workers in the agrifood sector, working from home is not possible; consequently, it is critical to put in place a series of security measures that will allow them to perform their functions in the food production and supply chain without putting their health at risk. Only with healthy and safe workers can food products move along the chain and be available to final consumers.

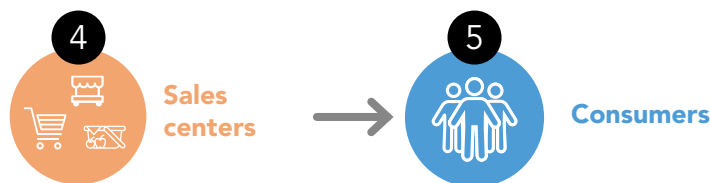
¹ A fomite is an inert and lifeless object or material capable of carrying pathogenic organisms (bacteria, fungi, viruses, and parasites). For example, fomites are clothing, bed sheets, unsterilized hospital equipment, etc.



Markets, where it all started.

One hypothesis is that the spread of the virus started in a wet market, where live animals are kept, slaughtered and dismembered. That said, as far as the spread of COVID-19 is concerned, zoonotic transmission – from animals to people – is not the main means of infection, but contact between people, as mentioned above. These markets pose a particular risk of transmission of other pathogens between workers and customers. Thus a strict application of practices that ensure food safety is recommended. Common disinfectants and sanitizers (such as soap, chlorine or quaternary ammonium, among others) can eliminate most pathogens, including coronaviruses.

2.2. Consumer exposure risk to COVID-1



Is there a risk of transmitting COVID-19 through food?

As mentioned above, despite having little specific information about the virus responsible for COVID-19, it is assumed that its behaviour and characteristics are similar to those of other viruses responsible for respiratory diseases (such as SARS and/or MERS). As noted above, SARS-CoV-2 is very unlikely to be transmitted through food, since the virus needs an animal or human host to do so.

Although genetic material (RNA) of the COVID-19 virus has been isolated from stool samples of infected patients, no cases have been reported, nor is there evidence of faecal-oral transmission, which is particularly important for food handlers.

Is COVID-19 a zoonosis?

According to nucleic acid sequence analysis, bats are presumed to be the most likely reservoir of SARS-CoV-2. However, to date, there are no documented cases of direct transmission from bats to humans, so other wildlife species may have acted as intermediate hosts between bats and humans; nor is there evidence to identify with certainty the involvement of other wildlife species. Although disease transmission has only been reported as a result of human-to-human transmission, identifying which wildlife species contributed to animal-human transmission at the start of the outbreak remains a critical task to prevent the virus from re-emerging once the current pandemic is under control (FAO, 2020).

The risk of going shopping

We know that the main agent of transmission of the COVID-19 is direct contact between people, either when a healthy person is exposed to contaminated droplets emitted by an infected person (sick or asymptomatic), or by contact with fomites contaminated with SARS-CoV-2 (FAO and WHO, 2020a). As a result, consumers are exposed to the disease when they attend spaces where many people circulate and where it is not possible to maintain physical distance.

In most parts of the world, food sale is considered an activity that cannot be interrupted by sanitary measures. Therefore, supermarkets, food markets, retail trade, and free trade fairs continue to operate, despite quarantine and restrictions on trade operation in general.

In many markets and free fairs, there is still a large influx of people, so the authorities are implementing measures to reduce infection risks. On the other hand, supermarkets and retail stores have limited the number of people who can shop at the same time in the stores. However, this type of measure has had negative side effects – mainly in supermarkets – by displacing the concentration of people from inside

to outside the premises, where they accumulate waiting their turn to enter, as has been observed by FAO's national offices in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Most hotels, restaurants, and cafes have closed, as almost all governments have prohibited them from serving customers in person. In any case, the relevant authorities have generally not placed restrictions on the online sale and home delivery of their products, which has reduced the risk of infection to consumers.

3. Reducing the risks of contracting COVID-19: some recommendations



Measures related to the safety of workers, and consumers who are going to buy food products are listed and described below, in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

3.1. Measures to prevent infection in workers

The vast majority of countries have implemented restrictive measures that seek to reduce contact between people, to minimize the health risk of contracting COVID-19.

Yet, since food is a basic input for people, many of these standards are not mandatory for workers who produce and distribute food. Health and safety protection for all those working in food production and food supply chains is therefore essential. All parties involved in this chain must contribute to safeguarding the health of workers. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020a), and the Andean Community General Secretariat, the Standing Veterinary Committee of the Southern Cone (CVP, by its initials in Spanish), and the International Regional Organization for Plant and Animal Health (OIRSA, by its initials in Spanish) (2020), recommend implementing a series of measures to protect workers in the food industry and agricultural sector, respectively:



Knowing the symptoms of COVID-19: To reduce the risks of transmission in the workplace, workers must know and recognize the symptoms of the disease, so that they know when to seek health care and get tested.

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are:

- Fever (temperature of 37.5 degrees Celsius or more);
- Coughing (of any kind, not just non-productive coughs);
- Dyspnoea;
- Breathing difficulties;
- Fatigue.

Physical distancing: Physical distancing is crucial to stop the spread of the new coronavirus. Distancing seeks to minimize contact between potentially infected and healthy people. All food businesses should put in place physical distancing measures. WHO recommends maintaining a distance of at least one meter (three feet) between workers.

Companies can implement the following measures to maintain physical distance:

- Taking workers temperature, and disposal of alcohol-based hand sanitizer at the entrance or entrances to the work place, as well as in several strategic places of the company.
- Moving workstations around production lines so that workers are not located next to each other or in front of each other.
- Providing staff with a personal protective kit that includes items such as masks, disposable gloves, coveralls, and clean boots every day.

- Increasing the space between workstations, regardless of whether this measure may affect the speed of production lines.
- Organizing staff into smaller groups or teams to reduce interaction among people.

Preventing the Spread of COVID-19 in the Workplace

All employees who do not feel well or have symptoms should not go to or remain in the workplace. When coughing or sneezing, an infected worker could contaminate company facility surfaces and thus transmit the virus to other workers.

It is not excluded that there may be people infected with the virus in workplaces who have no symptoms (asymptomatic). To minimize the risk of infection, all workers in food businesses must strictly follow safety protocols, hygiene rules, and make appropriate use of personal protective equipment.

Finally, to avoid all kinds of face-to-face meetings, it is necessary to implement means allowing workers to communicate with their bosses and peers either through phone calls or emails.

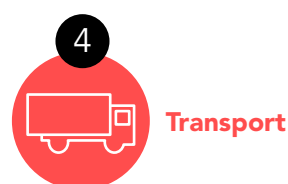
Good hygiene practices in the workplace:

<p>Good hand hygiene by washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds (as recommended by WHO), as often as necessary.</p>	<p>Frequent use of hydroalcoholic gel, which should be available at several strategic points in the workplace.</p>	<p>Good respiratory hygiene (cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, discard tissues after use, and wash hands). Discarded material must be constantly removed and disposed of.</p>	<p>Regular washing or disinfection of work surfaces and contact points (for example, door handles).</p>	<p>No close contact with anyone who has respiratory symptoms (for example, coughing or sneezing).</p>

In agricultural facilities, limit access to people

People who work and live on farms or rural production units must avoid exposure to potential areas of infection, such as cities and population centres near production units. They must also restrict as much as possible the access of personnel from outside the farm, ensuring that the entrance door to the property remains closed, thus preventing the free entry of people, animals, and vehicles to the production unit.

If the entry of trucks or outside persons is necessary, take precautions of distance, hygiene, and disinfection at the entrance of milk collection trucks, animal feed, seeds, or other input suppliers. Schedule the visit in advance and separate the staff that receives the products from the rest of the workers (Andean Community General Secretariat et al., 2020).



Transport and delivery of ingredients, and food products

The virus can only enter the facility through infected persons or contaminated fomites. Carriers must take special care when moving physically to areas with high rates of infection. Among the measures, recommendations are:

- Do not get out of your vehicles when delivering goods to food business facilities.

- Respect physical distancing rules.
- People can get the virus by touching a contaminated surface or by shaking hands with an infected person. Surfaces that are most likely to be contaminated with this virus are those most frequently touched, such as steering wheels, door handles, or cell phones, as well as cargo door handles.
- Take scrupulous care of hygiene and use clean protective clothing.
- For feeding on the road, ideally bring your food from home.



Food centers:

These centers should make every effort to ensure high standards of hygiene, protect their workers from risks of infection, maintain physical distancing, remain open to the public and ensure that they receive sufficient supplies.

Some measures to put in place among workers are:

- Workers must respect the safety measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (masks, gloves, hygiene measures).
- Limit the number of customers entering centers to prevent workers from being exposed to potential vectors of the virus.
- Promote contactless payment methods so that workers do not have to handle money when consumers buy their products.

Since this is a space shared with consumers, the following point describes in detail the measures to take in various food centers.

3.2. Measures to prevent infection in consumers



To prevent the transmission of COVID-19 to food consumers, special care must be taken at the final links of the value chain, especially with people who handle food, whether they sell it or cook it at home, and directly touch the unpackaged food. This also includes any other person or worker who may touch food contact surfaces or other surfaces in areas where unpackaged food is handled.

If you suspect you are sick, stay home. The first thing a food handler should do is to stay home if he or she suspects any of the symptoms of COVID-19. To do this, food handlers should be aware of the symptoms, notify their superiors, and have the necessary tests performed. The manager's duty is to train his workers on the symptoms of COVID-19.

Common measures: Many times, infected people do not have signs or symptoms of the disease because they are in the early stages of infection. They may also have only mild symptoms, which can easily go unnoticed. This is precisely why this group of people may have contributed to the spread of the disease. Therefore, all employees in food businesses, regardless of their apparent health status, should follow strict practices that ensure food hygiene in their facilities, in accordance with existing food safety management systems. As mentioned throughout this bulletin, common disinfectants and sanitizers used in food processing are likely to destruct most pathogens, including coronaviruses.

These measures are (FAO and WHO, 2020a):

- Good hand hygiene by washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds (as recommended by WHO), as often as necessary.
- Frequent use of hydroalcoholic gel, which should be available at several strategic points in the workplace.
- Good respiratory hygiene (cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, discard tissues after use, and wash hands). Discarded material must be constantly removed and disposed of.
- Regular washing or disinfection of work surfaces and contact points (for example, door handles).
- No close contact with anyone who has respiratory symptoms (for example, coughing or sneezing).

The application of sound principles of environmental sanitation, personal hygiene and established food safety practices will reduce the probability of COVID19 transmission.

Food retail centers:

In retail food centers, physical distancing is essential to reduce the risk of transmitting disease. These are some practical steps that can be taken (FAO and WHO, 2020a):

- Limited number of customers present at the same time inside the center.
- Signs at the entrance to ask clients not to enter the facility if they are not feeling well or if they have symptoms associated with COVID-19.
- Respect of physical distance ensured in the rows, both inside and outside the center; drawing marks on the floor can make it easier to maintain physical distances, especially in busy areas such as counters and checkouts.
- Hydroalcoholic solutions disposal to encourage hand washing, spray disinfectants, and disposable paper towels at the entrance of the center.
- Plexiglas screens at checkouts and counters to further protect staff.
- Promotion of contactless payment methods.
- As a growing number of customers bring their own shopping bags, it is suggested to put messages in centers (shops, warehouses, supermarkets) advising them to clean their bags before each use.

COVID-19 transmission risk should diminish by identifying which parts of the center are most frequently touched and by cleaning and disinfecting them regularly. In this regard, the following measures can be considered (FAO and WHO, 2020a):



Wipes disposal (or other similar cleaning items) for clients to clean cart handles and baskets; assigned staff can also perform this disinfection task after each use.



Frequent washing and disinfection of certain items such as ladles, tongs, and condiment boxes.



If possible, doors kept open to prevent customers from touching them.

Exposure of unpacked food:

Although it has been noted in this document that, at this time, no scientific evidence indicates transmission of this virus through food, hygienic practices must be implemented on the shelves of unpacked food, such as the following:

- Frequent washing and disinfection of all food contact surfaces and utensils.
- As a rule, workers must wash their hands often and, if they wear gloves, change them before and after touching food.
- Frequent cleaning and disinfection of the shelves or gondolas, and self-service utensils used by consumers.

- Hydroalcoholic solution available to consumers at the entrance and exit of the center.
- Consider not displaying at self-service counters or selling unwrapped baked goods. These products should be wrapped in plastic, cellophane or paper. Bakery and pastry products sold in bulk should be under Plexiglas display cases, and customers should use tongs to pick them up and place them in a bag.
- Tell customers should to always wash fruits and vegetables with disinfectants before consumption.

Wholesale food centers:

The Latin American Federation of Food Markets (FLAMA, by its initials in Spanish) and FAO agreed to share on a regular basis the main strategies for preventing COVID-19 contamination in wholesale markets and supply centres in the region (FAO and FLAMA, 2020). To this end, differentiated prevention measures were published for operators, traders and consumers.

Among the measures aimed at operators, like those in retail markets: care and hygiene for people working with food, permanent access to disinfectant material, and leaving the workplace in the event of suspicion or presence of signs and symptoms associated with the virus. Additionally:

- Permanent disinfection of the facilities in warehouses, corridors, bathrooms, and other common areas, to reduce risks.
- Guide for consumers on food hygiene standards and food packaging disinfection.
- Coordination with local health agencies for random body temperature checks of all employees in the markets.
- Scheduled delivery logistics to avoid influx of people.
- Information dissemination through electronic wall newspaper, corporate mailings, and printed instructions on COVID-19 prevention.

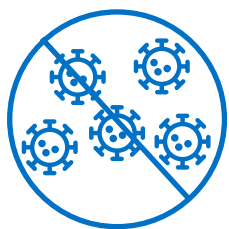
For traders and consumers in general, recommendations are as follows:

- Maintain a distance of at least one meter from the vendors.
- Make the purchase as quickly as possible.
- Wear a mask and disposable gloves when handling food in the center.
- Avoid shopping with elderly people, pregnant women, and people with chronic illnesses whenever possible.

In the same way, key actions and operations have been proposed, such as:

- Changes in operating hours.
- Permits to sell agricultural products on trucks.
- Reorganization of parking lots to avoid crowding and traffic.
- Registration of buyers and traders to reduce the crowding of people in the markets.
- Sales incentives by means of computer tools for products, to facilitate marketing.
- Sharing logistic routes for product delivery with other market traders, thus reducing the number of trips.

4. The role of food safety in the crisis



4.1. The challenge for national food safety authorities

In the context of a global pandemic, one of the main problems countries are facing is the collapse of their health system. In a collapsed health system, outbreaks of foodborne diseases must be contained to the greatest extent possible to avoid devastating health and economic consequences in both developed and developing countries.

Therefore, improved food safety practices, such as those recommended in Codex Alimentarius documents, would reduce the probability of food contamination with pathogens and help reduce the public health burden caused by foodborne infections. Prevention of contamination in the food chain will reduce foodborne diseases and the likelihood of new diseases emerging, such as COVID-19 itself.

As noted by FAO (2020), the Codex Alimentarius Commission has adopted several practical guidelines on how to apply and implement best practices to ensure food hygiene (*General Principles of Food Hygiene*, CXC 1-1969), handling of meat (*Code of Hygienic Practice for Meat*, CXC 58-2005) and control of viruses in food (*Guidelines on the Application of General Principles of Food Hygiene to the Control of Viruses in Food*, CAC / GL79-2012).

However, maintaining health standards to prevent these types of diseases is an exceptional and unprecedented challenge for authorities responsible for national food safety control systems. In many countries, competent authority staff has had to work from home, cancelling or rescheduling all face-to-face meetings to teleconferences. Preserving routine activities without interruption is a major challenge. These activities are for example inspection of food trade operations; export certification; control of imported food; monitoring and surveillance of food safety supply chain; food sampling and analysis; food incident management; advice on food safety, and food standards for the food industry and the public (FAO and WHO, 2020b).

In this context, some of the major challenges faced by national authorities are:

- Implementation of contingency plans.
- reduced capacity to maintain a food safety inspection programme in full operation, due to reassignment of staff to COVID-19 national emergency response teams, home-based staff and sick staff.
- Reduced food analysis capacity in food laboratories, reassigned to clinical testing for COVID-19.
- Increased risk of food fraud in the food supply chain.
- Increased number of inquiries and questions from government authorities, food industry, consumers and media.

Thus, competent authorities play a key role in this pandemic by enabling producers and processors to continue to operate effectively, keeping food supply lines open and secure.

4.2. The proposal for national food safety authorities

The relevant authority should take several measures (FAO and WHO, 2020b) to preserve the integrity of the national food safety control system and thus support international trade and food supply chain.

One of them is to focus on critical services during the current pandemic. This may include introducing temporary suspensions of low-risk control activities that do not immediately affect safe food supply. Temporary suspension of these activities will allow authorities to continue to safeguard the health and safety of their personnel while refocusing efforts on higher risk areas and critical food safety activities. Depending on national priorities, some authorities may decide to prioritize selected activities such as:

- inspection of high-risk food businesses;
- export certification;
- import control services;
- food incident management; and/or
- investigation of food complaints.

Competent authorities must continue to monitor the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, making the necessary adjustments to their work programs to provide services that are critical to preserve the integrity of their food safety systems. To achieve this, FAO and WHO (2020b) propose:

- **Cooperation with multiple agencies and development of contingency plans.** All competent authorities should have an emergency response or contingency plan that can be implemented, following FAO and WHO (2010) guidelines. Cooperation and collaboration among all relevant agencies at the national level is an essential component of the response to this pandemic. The need for cooperation between public health and food safety has never been more urgent.
- **Keeping the food safety inspection programme operational.** As a result of restricting the movement of people, the regular channel of programme implementation may be seriously disrupted (for example by limited staff and laboratories). Thus, the key issue is to ensure compliance with food legislation on those premises that pose the greatest risk. Thus, suggestions are as follows:
 - Defining a risk profile for each food business, paying special attention to slaughterhouses and companies that require imported inputs.
 - Implementing temporary measures such as validation through electronic documents instead of official certificates and relying on private and independent professional bodies to meet the objectives of the programme.
 - Protecting staff, providing them with the necessary equipment and emphasizing the need to respect physical distancing protocols. Suspender temporalmente los programas de control, principalmente aquellos programas de monitoreo y vigilancia rutinarios de bajo riesgo.
 - Considering temporary exemptions, since the primary objective is to ensure food safety for vulnerable households, and therefore, during this period, it is appropriate to evaluate flexibility in regulation and control.
- **Food laboratories:** As the capacity of food safety laboratories is reduced, testing and analysis needs to be focused on high-risk locations. Ensuring minimum national capacity is essential.
- **Increased risks to food supply integrity.** With an increased risk of fraud, due to reduced oversight, there is a need to investigate allegations of food fraud and work closely with food companies, especially those selling food over the Internet.
- **Staff training:** field staff must know the symptoms of COVID-19, and if they suspect being infected, they should be excluded from work and tested. Similarly, they should be sufficiently trained to pass on information to users. A permanent digital communication channel should be set up to guide and resolve public queries.
- **Communication:** In times of COVID-19, updated and reliable information must be transmitted to fight disinformation. It is important to reiterate to the public that even if there are no reported cases of COVID-19 from food consumption, providing hygiene recommendations to prevent SARS-CoV-2 transmission is essential to raise awareness among consumers and food handlers.

5. Interview with the Executive Secretary of the Chilean Agency for Food Safety and Quality



We interviewed Nuri Gras, the Executive Secretary of the Chilean Agency for Food Safety and Quality (ACHIPIA, by its initials in Spanish) about the exceptional and unprecedented challenge posed by the COVID-19 crisis to the authorities responsible for national food safety control systems.



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To ensure safe food production, workers in the agrifood industry must have the lowest possible exposure to COVID-19. As an institution, have you given recommendations to prevent them from getting sick?

The Ministry of Agriculture has developed recommendations to avoid contagion. Based on these, the companies or production units have implemented measures to mitigate the risk. On the one hand, we have large industries and, on the other hand, small agricultural producers and rural family farming, which are supported by the different services of our ministry. So, yes, we have incorporated basic measures to protect the health of workers for confronting this epidemic.

What we have here is a strong articulation and coordination between the private sector – independent in its productive scale – and the state to jointly face the tremendous challenge of keeping the food chains operational and ensuring supply for the population. To this end, we take into consideration everything from raw materials primary producers to retailers of food of agricultural origin, such as wholesale markets and free trade fairs.

In fact, the agency I lead has collaborated in the development of support material to avoid COVID-19 infections in the agrifood sector. This material has been shared on our website and discussed through webinars. We have also strengthened good agricultural and manufacturing practices in the agrifood sector.

However, and we have stressed this, food safety is a basic factor in food production. So managing these aspects is a continuous task and carries a great responsibility for food producers. If an increase in foodborne diseases were to occur, health services, which are currently focused on dealing with the pandemic, could collapse unnecessarily.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it appears that the food retail sector faces greater challenges in maintaining recommended hygiene standards. Have new sanitary measures or protocols been established to ensure the safety of unpackaged foods sold in the retail market, whether at free trade fairs or in warehouses?

First, it is worth mentioning that, to date, the evidence shows us that food does not play a role in the virus transmission. There is an international consensus on this.

However, food safety is a permanent challenge that should not be neglected in this emergency. So, in addition to prevention measures against COVID-19, we have insisted on the need to ensure that the systems or practices implemented to manage food hygiene continue to function effectively. That is why articulation and coordination between the private sector and the state is so important.

In addition to the measures mentioned above, ACHIPIA, together with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), is carrying out support work for free fairs in Chile, to provide more specific preventive measures for the fairs, and avoid COVID-19 infections in workers, and the attending public.

FAO says that investing in educating consumers about food safety can potentially reduce foodborne diseases, and generate savings of up to ten times every dollar invested. In what ways has your institution been concerned with educating people about the importance of eating safe food?

We consider food education to be a very important element. This is why we have worked on the design, elaboration and development of easy-to-understand, and usable educational materials. Based on an experience-based approach, we have built a working tool that we have called the "Confidence Building Model". This model focuses on permanent communication and communication in crisis situations.

Like this model, ACHIPIA has developed other educational tools. Today we have more than twelve tools based on the principles of the confidence-building model, which include workshops with children, and food handlers. In our

application, Appchipia, you can access all the material generated to help reduce the risks of foodborne diseases. This is especially important in these times of containment, where food handling in the home is greater.

Another important element, aimed mainly at children, is the implementation of a public policy that promotes a culture of food safety from an early age (0-4 years).

Do you think that international food standards (Codex Alimentarius or Food Code) will become more relevant in the coming weeks/months? How do these standards support regional legislation and enable people to have access to safe food?

Chile has been a member of Codex since its early stages, and since then the country has begun to align its national legislation and regulations with the principles promoted by the code, thus building a national safety and quality system based on science, and the highest international standards.

Since the pandemic was declared, the Codex Committee has continued its regional coordination work by pioneering the use of web tools, and maintaining constant communication with the countries of the region.

In a global food chain, where all countries export or import food, Codex is needed more than ever to ensure the delivery of safe food to people.

FAO estimates that 600 million people get sick each year from eating food contaminated with bacteria, viruses, toxins or chemicals, and 420 000 of them die. Compared to previous years, have you detected changes in the number of people getting sick from eating contaminated food?

Right now all efforts are focused on combating COVID-19. We have seen how food consumption patterns have changed dramatically. To name a few examples, we see how people are cooking much more than before. We are also witnessing that the way people get their food seems to be changing, with a huge increase in the delivery of prepared and unprepared foods.

I think it is still too early to answer this question, but it is something that, as a government, we will have to be monitoring.

How has the interaction/cooperation been with other countries/institutions in the region involved in maintaining food safety in this pandemic?

Several coordination initiatives are lead by Chile. I would like to highlight the country's catalysing and coordinating role. A couple of weeks ago, the Minister of Agriculture, Antonio Walker, facilitated an unprecedented meeting that connected the vast majority of agriculture ministers in the Americas.

In a more specific area, we have established an international network of contacts, and agreements with practically the entire world, as well as a very close relationship with the United Nations system specialized in food and food safety issues.

Chile currently coordinates the Codex for Latin America and the Caribbean. The country is also part of the Codex Executive Committee, and has a member in the advisory group of the WHO International Food Safety Expert Network (INFOSAN).

In addition, we maintain a very close relationship with prestigious institutions, including the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA), the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR), among others. Thanks to this close collaboration, we could produce communication materials.

Finally, World Food Safety Day is celebrated every 7 June. Have you planned any initiatives or activities for this year that would address the effects of the pandemic?

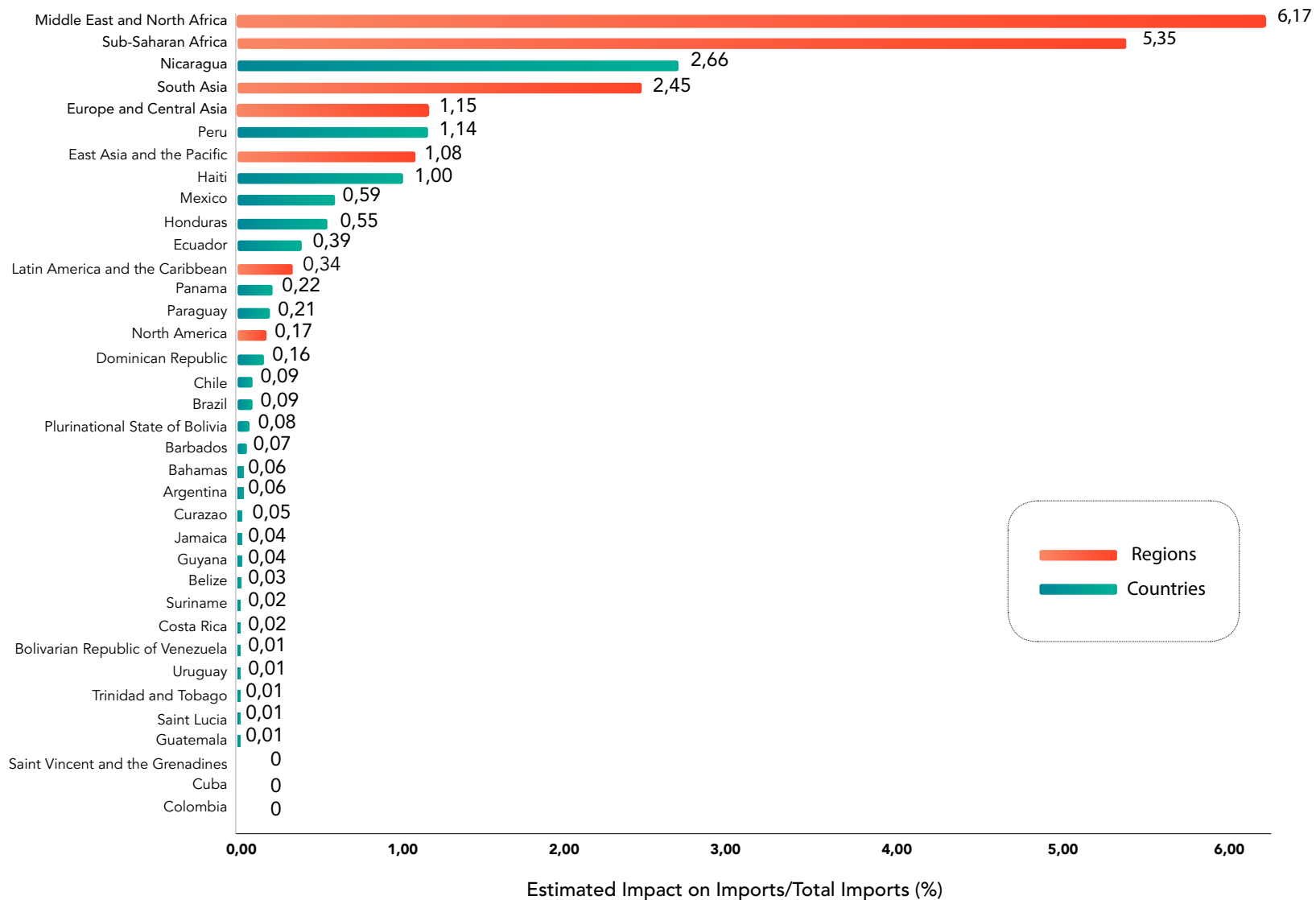
Last year, when the world first celebrated World Food Safety Day, Chile held several activities. It was a success; many people participated. We were at the Central Market in Santiago and, with the support of FAO, we organized a cycle of three thematic seminars called "Food safety in a changing world", which took place between 3 and 5 June in the FAO auditorium in Santiago.

This year, for obvious reasons, the situation does not allow us to repeat last year's recipe. We are working to bring this celebration to the homes of all Chileans in a virtual way, contemplating the participation of national and international experts. We are going to keep disseminating relevant and updated content for the actors of the National System of Food Safety and Quality (SNICA, by its initials in Spanish), also incorporating the theme of the pandemic.

6. The pandemic in numbers: impact on domestic food supply



Figure 3/ Impact of food export restrictions on domestic food imports (in %)*



Source: COVID-19 Food Trade Policy Tracker - IFPRI

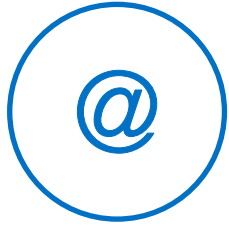
In the current COVID-19 crisis, some national governments have already restricted or banned food exports. According to Laborde, Mamun and Parent (2020), so far these restrictions have affected about 5 percent of the world's traded calories, still far from the 19 percent observed during the 2007 and 2008 food price crisis. Precisely because of the evidence gathered during the food crisis on how disruptive food trade restrictions were, it is critical to monitor food trade at the global level and to warn against policies that could have a negative impact on global and national food security.

At the end of April 2020, 15 countries had binding active export restrictions on food, with some Eastern European countries having the most binding restrictions. For example, in Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation, these restrictions account for about half of their food exports. In Latin America, only Honduras has restricted red bean exports, which represents less than 0.5 percent of the country's exports.

As countries impose export restrictions, it is also important to ask how food imports from trading partners might be affected. What we see is that the Americas, Latin America above all, are the least affected globally. Less than half a percent of the region's food imports are negatively affected, in contrast to more than 5 percent of food imports in the Middle East, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa, according to Laborde, Mamun and Parent (2020). For most Latin American countries, food imports are affected by less than 1 percent, if at all, only with the exception of Peru and Nicaragua, where food imports are affected by more than 1 percent.

* To deepen the analysis of the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on food, agriculture and rural development, we will present in each weekly bulletin a "microanalysis" prepared in collaboration with Professor Miguel Robles.

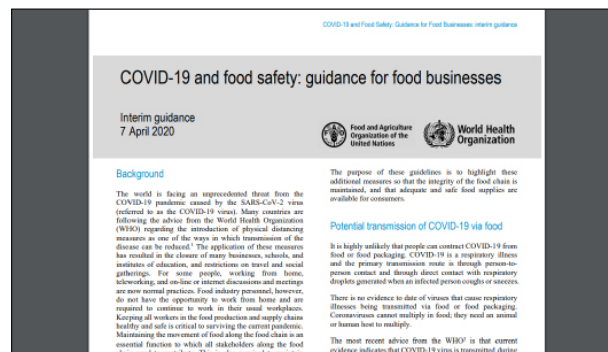
7. Resources



In this section you will find relevant information concerning the topic that has been discussed in case you wish to go deeper into it.

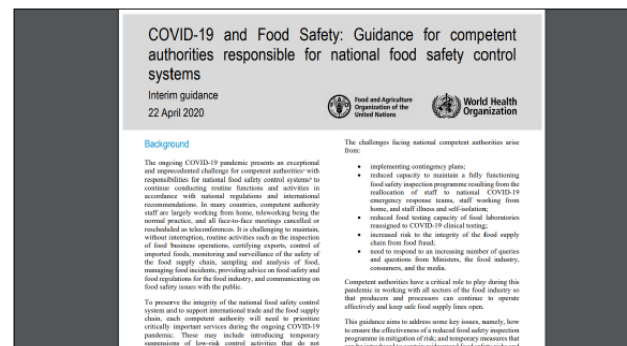
FAO and WHO COVID-19 and food safety: guidance for food businesses <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8660en/CA8660EN.pdf>

This article provides guidelines for food businesses to protect their workers from infection and maintain food safety management systems.



FAO/WHO COVID-19 and Food Safety: Guidance for competent authorities responsible for national food safety control systems <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8842en/CA8842EN.pdf>

This document provides information for national food safety authorities and control systems.



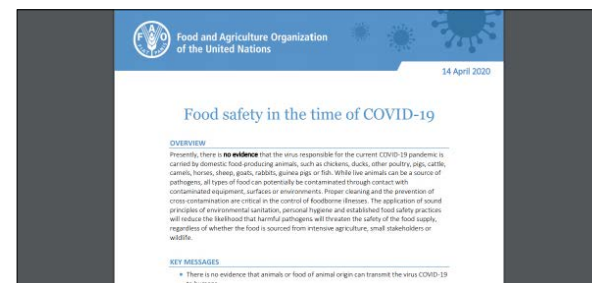
Codex Alimentarius International Food Standards <http://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/about-codex/es/>

Codex Alimentarius is about safe, good food for everyone, everywhere. This page provides guidelines and codes of practice that contribute to the safety, quality and fairness of international food trade.



FAO Food safety in the time of COVID-19 <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8623en/CA8623EN.pdf>

Este artículo presenta información específica acerca del virus responsable del COVID-19. La aplicación de principios sólidos de saneamiento ambiental, higiene personal y prácticas establecidas de seguridad alimentaria reducirá la probabilidad de que los patógenos nocivos amenacen la seguridad del suministro de alimentos.



General Secretariat of the Andean Community, Permanent Veterinary Committee of the Southern Cone and Regional International Organization for Agricultural Health Biosafety Guidelines for the Prevention of COVID-19 Infection Risk in rural areas <http://www.comunidadandina.org/StaticFiles/2020417212454DirectricesCOVID19.pdf>

This document provides advice and biosecurity measures to prevent the virus from being present among the population engaged in food production, processing and supply.



FAO and FLAMA Wholesale markets: action against COVID-19 <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8442es/CA8442ES.pdf>

This bulletin aims to regularly share the main infection prevention strategies adopted by wholesale markets, and to report on their activities, as well as the operating conditions of markets to ensure food supply.



8. Key messages



- To date, there is no evidence that COVID-19 pandemic is a zoonosis.
- Also, no evidence available shows that people can get COVID-19 through food consumption.
- In any case, it is necessary to take hygiene measures with food containers, in case the surface is contaminated.
- COVID-19, like other respiratory diseases, is mainly transmitted through direct contact between people (contact with droplets or fomites).
- The food supply chain cannot be stopped. As a result, food system workers must remain in their jobs, increasing the risks of contracting COVID-19.
- It is crucial to put in place actions related to workers safety, to avoid contagion.
- Food safety authorities face the challenge of working in conditions where the operation of their officials (due to restrictive measures) and laboratories (focused on the detection of COVID-19) is limited.
- However, care must be taken to maintain safety standards so that foodborne diseases do not become another challenge for the public health system.
- Preventing contamination in the food chain will reduce foodborne diseases and reduce the possibility of new diseases such as COVID-19.
- Food can be safe to eat if following safe food handling and preparation practices.



9. References



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