

We Can Get Food Poisoning, Even during a Pandemic

By Bruce K. Bernard, PhD and Linda F. Golodner

August 7, 2020

In a nutshell...

Food safety remains a significant public health issue in the U.S. during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Recommendations for avoiding foodborne illness include the traditional “clean, separate, cook, and chill” messages as well as common sense adaptations based on the “new normal” of life during the coronavirus pandemic.

With a [Cyclospora recall](#) of pre-packaged salads centered in the mid-west, and a rapidly growing multistate outbreak of [Salmonella Newport in onions](#) there is more happening in the world of public health than the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. In addition to avoiding the virus by wearing face masks and maintaining social distancing and good hand hygiene, we must remain vigilant where our food is concerned. [The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) estimates that each year, 48 million people are stricken with a foodborne illness, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die. Will the pandemic alter these statistics? For better or worse? Time will tell that interesting story.



Food Safety Considerations during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Traditionally, consumers have been urged to manage their risk of foodborne illness, or “food poisoning,” by heeding four key principles of food safety: [clean, separate, cook, and chill](#). These are particularly important to revisit during the pandemic as many of us have changed the way we obtain and store our food. Some of us are cooking and baking more than we used to. We may be tempted to cut “food safety corners” here and there around the kitchen. That could lead to unpleasant results.

Perhaps, like us, you are making fewer trips to the grocery store but purchasing more food per trip to reduce your potential exposure to the coronavirus. If you are stocking up, it is important to store foods correctly. For example, pay attention to “use by” dates and freeze perishable foods that you know you cannot use by those dates. If you order food delivery directly from a grocery store or hire a service to shop for you, check expiration dates and the quality of fresh produce as you unpack your groceries, just as you would when choosing groceries yourself. If you find an expired product, you can request a refund.

Some items bought in large quantities, such as fresh vegetables, can be cooked and frozen in appropriate portions for later use. “Jumbo” packages of fish, poultry, and meat can be divided and frozen for future meals as well. Clean, airtight containers can be used to store excess cereal, rice, flour, and sugar.

Hand-washing is critically important before, during, and after working with food. Perhaps you are doing some barbecuing this summer. Avoid cross-contaminating food-contact surfaces. For example, the raw juice-filled platter used to transport raw steaks to the backyard grill should not be used to transport the cooked steaks to the dinner table. And a food thermometer is a handy tool for ensuring your [cooked food has reached a safe temperature](#). [The safe minimum cooking temperature](#) is the minimum temperature a given food should be brought to during cooking to destroy the most heat-resistant pathogen of concern in that food.

Foodborne Disease Facts

There are over 250 known foodborne diseases, [according to CDC](#). These diseases are caused by bacteria (e.g., [Salmonella](#), [E. coli](#), and [Campylobacter](#)), parasites (e.g., [Cyclospora](#) and [Cryptosporidium](#)), and viruses (e.g., [norovirus](#)). According to the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#), the coronavirus is not known to be transmitted through food. Anyone can develop “food poisoning,” but those most at risk include older adults, young children, people with weakened immune systems, and pregnant women. Most people experience only mild symptoms, lasting a few hours to several days, but some people need to be hospitalized. More rarely, some food poisonings result in long-term health problems or even death, [reports CDC](#).

The most common symptoms of food poisoning are upset stomach, stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and fever. Symptoms may take from hours to days to develop after you have consumed a contaminated food or drink. It is important to drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration, a common result from diarrhea or vomiting. Consult your doctor if you have bloody stools, high fever (temperature over 102 °F), frequent vomiting that prevents keeping liquids down, signs of dehydration (e.g., little or no urination, very dry mouth and throat, feeling dizzy when standing up), or diarrhea that lasts more than three days.

Food Safety: Out of the Shadows

[FDA reports](#) the pandemic has spawned complex food issues globally. These include spot shortages of some foods and wasting food that was meant for restaurants and schools that were shuttered. Consumers have had to adjust to the “new normal” to provide nourishment for their families, many on a reduced income due to pandemic-related furloughs and layoffs.

It is reassuring to know that the CDC, FDA, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and state and local health departments continue to investigate foodborne illnesses and outbreaks during the pandemic, including issuing food recalls as needed. To help protect families from food poisoning, we repeat the sage advice that consumers [clean, separate, cook, and chill](#) their foods appropriately, and pay close attention to food safety announcements (sign up to receive these electronically [here](#)). While the pandemic is clearly the biggest public health issue of our time, food safety is no small potatoes.

Bruce K. Bernard, PhD, is President of SRA Consulting, Inc., Associate Editor of the International Journal of Toxicology, and lives in Cambridge, MD. Linda F. Golodner is President Emeritus of the National Consumers League and Vice Chair of the Water Quality & Health Council.

A Simple Disinfectant for Food-contact Surfaces

Disinfect kitchen counters, cutting boards, and other food preparation surfaces with a simple solution of 1/2 tablespoon of regular chlorine bleach added to 1/2 gallon of water. Clean the surface first with soapy water and then apply the disinfecting solution. Let it air dry.

Make the solution daily, as it breaks down over time. Never mix bleach with other cleaning products.