COVID-19: Guidance for Food Service Businesses

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Version	Date	Changes from previous version
1.1	25/06/2020	Clarified wording re contact tracing measures in Appendix 1
1.2	19/10/2020	Link to Government Resilience and Recovery Plan and Framework for Restrictive Measures added

Contents

Key points

This document should be read in conjunction with **COVID-19 guidance which has been provided to food businesses** by the following agencies:

1. [Return to Work Safely Protocol](#) which applies to all workplaces and has its basis in the Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act 2005.
2. [NSAI Guidance for Retailers](#)
3. [Failte Ireland Guidance](#) for Tourism and Hospitality Sector
4. [FSAI Guidance and FAQs](#) on food safety during COVID-19
5. [Government Resilience and Recovery: Plan for Living with COVID-19](#)

Physical distancing of 2-metres should be maintained between tables. However, if this is not possible, this can be reduced to 1 metre in <u>controlled environments</u> if all of the other risk mitigations requirements outlined in <u>Appendix 1</u> have been met AND pre-booked time-limited slots are in place, which are a maximum of 1 hour 45 minutes duration. There should be a minimum of 15 minutes between bookings in order to allow for adequate cleaning and to allow customers to leave and enter, without mixing.

Good staff hygiene practices effective in controlling COVID-19 include:

- proper hand hygiene – washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
- frequent use of alcohol-based hand sanitisers;
- good respiratory etiquette (cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing; dispose of tissues and wash hands);
- frequent cleaning/disinfection of work surfaces and touch points such as door handles;
- avoiding close contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing.

Background

Food service business operators must continue to comply with the requirements of Food Control Legislation, based on the principles of HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point), as per legislative requirements. These systems are underpinned by good hygiene practices, cleaning and sanitation and fitness to work.

There continues to be a requirement for the food service business to ensure compliance with measures to protect food workers and service users from contracting COVID-19, to mitigate exposure risks and transmission of the virus, and to strengthen food hygiene and sanitation practices.

Purpose and scope

The purpose of this guidance is to highlight key public health measures for food service businesses to mitigate exposure to or transmission of the virus, and to maintain the health and safety of staff and customers. Food service businesses should follow Government advice and operate in line with the [Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 and Framework for Restrictive Measures](#).

Controlled and uncontrolled environments

Public and private venues or workplaces are considered 'controlled' environments. This includes food and consumption businesses such as restaurants and cafés.
'Uncontrolled environments' are settings where people have open access to the premises and generally don't know each other and are unlikely to be in close contact with each other for an extended period of time. Examples include supermarkets, retail stores, shopping malls and takeaway-only food outlets. Additional details on controlled and uncontrolled environments can be found in [Appendix 1](#).
Inclusion criteria: This guidance covers food and consumption businesses such as restaurants and cafés (controlled environments).

Exclusion criteria: This guidance does not cover retail outlets e.g. take-away food outlets (uncontrolled environments).

Potential transmission of COVID-19 via food

There is no evidence to date of viruses that cause respiratory illnesses being transmitted via food or food packaging. COVID-19 is a respiratory illness and the primary transmission route is through person-to-person contact and through direct contact with respiratory droplets generated when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Coronaviruses cannot multiply in food; they need an animal or human host to multiply.

It is possible that someone may become infected by touching a contaminated surface, object, or the hand of an infected person and then touching their own mouth, nose, or eyes. This can happen, for instance, when touching door knobs or shaking hands and then touching the face.

It is imperative for food service businesses to reinforce personal hygiene measures and provide refresher training on food hygiene principles to eliminate or reduce the risk of food surfaces and food packaging materials becoming contaminated with the virus from food service workers.

In addition, the food services business must maintain physical distancing and stringent hygiene and sanitation measures and promote frequent and effective handwashing and sanitation at each stage of food service. These measures will protect staff from spreading COVID-19 among workers and help to protect both the workforce and customers.

Although COVID-19 genetic material (RNA) has been isolated from stool samples of infected patients, there is no evidence of faecal-oral transmission. Handwashing after using the toilet is always an essential practice, especially when working with food.

Food workers

Awareness of COVID-19 symptoms

For the purpose of this guidance, food workers include food handlers, kitchen staff, waiting staff and people who directly touch open food as part of their work. It also includes staff who may touch food contact surfaces or other surfaces in rooms where open food is handled. The term can therefore also apply to managers, cleaners, maintenance contractors, delivery workers.

People who are feeling unwell should stay at home. Food business operators need to ensure that staff are aware of COVID-19 symptoms, exclusion from work policies, and where to access further information. The most important issue is for staff to be able to recognise symptoms early so that they can seek appropriate testing and medical care, and minimise the risk of infecting fellow workers.

Symptoms of COVID-19 can be similar to the symptoms of cold and flu.

Common symptoms of COVID-19 include:

- a fever (high temperature - 38 degrees Celsius or above)
- a cough - this can be any kind of cough, not just dry
- shortness of breath or breathing difficulties
- loss or change to your sense of smell or taste – this means you've noticed you cannot smell or taste anything, or things smell or taste different to normal

Preventing the spread of COVID-19 in the work environment
Staff working in food premises should be provided with language appropriate training on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and there should be strict supervision of COVID-19 control measures. For further information please see the Return to Work Safely Protocol.

Staff who are unwell or have symptoms of COVID-19 should not be at work and should be informed to contact their GP by phone. In some cases, infected people may be asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic and may not display any signs or symptoms of disease or may present with mild symptoms that are easily overlooked.

Some infected people not yet displaying symptoms have been shown to be contagious and capable of spreading the virus. This underscores the need for all personnel working in the food services sector, regardless of their apparent health status, to practice personal hygiene, such as adequate hand hygiene and good respiratory etiquette.

Food services businesses must ensure that COVID-19 infected (symptomatic individuals and confirmed asymptomatic carriers) workers and their close contacts (those with exposure to confirmed cases) are excluded from food premises. Staff who are unwell or who have any symptoms of COVID-19 should not work. A procedure to allow staff to report illness by phone (or email) should be established. Staff should be made aware of sick pay entitlement in order to encourage them to stay out of work in the scenarios described above.

Good staff hygiene practices effective in controlling COVID-19 include:

- proper hand hygiene – washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
- frequent use of alcohol-based hand sanitisers;
- good respiratory etiquette (cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing; dispose of tissues and wash hands);
- frequent cleaning/disinfection of work surfaces and touch points such as door handles;
- avoiding close contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing.

Use of personal protective equipment (PPE)

For further detailed information see the [Return to Work Safety Protocol](#).

Adequate supplies of tissues and hand hygiene facilities should be provided and replaced regularly. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) must be worn by employees if required by their roles. Each section of the restaurant must be assessed to decide what is needed. Training on how to properly use, apply and dispose of all PPE must be provided. Personal protective equipment (PPE), can be effective in reducing the spread of viruses and disease within the food industry, but only if used properly.

Disposable gloves

- It is acceptable to prepare and handle food with bare hands provided proper hand washing procedures are in place.

- Gloves may be used by food workers for food handling, according to usual food safety guidance, but they must ensure that the gloves are changed frequently and that hands are washed before putting gloves on, between glove changes and when gloves are removed.

- Proper hand hygiene is extremely important, whether using gloves or not. Handwashing is a greater protective barrier to infection than wearing disposable gloves.

- Gloves must be changed after carrying out non-food related activities such as opening/closing doors by hand, emptying bins, handling money, etc.

- Food workers should be aware that wearing gloves can allow bacteria to build up on the surface of the hands, so hand hygiene is extremely important when gloves are removed to avoid subsequent contamination of food.

- Food businesses need to ensure that adequate sanitary facilities are provided and ensure that food workers thoroughly and frequently wash their hands.

- Normal soap and warm running water are adequate for handwashing.

- Hand sanitisers can be used as an additional measure but should not replace handwashing.

<u>Face coverings</u>

The wearing of face coverings is recommended where it is difficult to practice physical distancing. The Return to Work Safely Protocol advises employers to make face coverings available to the worker in line with Public Health advice.

If face coverings are worn they must be clean and they must not be shared or handled by other colleagues. Employers and employees must keep up-to-date with the latest Public Health advice issued in regard to face coverings. See www.gov.ie for more information.

COVID-19 illness in the workplace
Staff need to be aware that they should not report to work with symptoms of COVID-19 but notify such illness by telephone. However, if a worker displays any symptoms of the virus during

work hours, the advice in the government COVID-19 resources for return to work safely should be followed.

This Return to Work Safely Protocol sets out the steps and processes that businesses must take to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace, how they will deal with a suspected case of COVID-19 in the workplace and the return to work polices.

The HSE protocols in relation to contact tracing, close contacts, self-isolation and restricted movements can be found on the HSE website.

Staff who have not had close contact with a confirmed case should continue taking the usual precautions and attend work as usual. Organising employees into small teams or workgroups will help to minimise disruption to workforce in the event of an employee reporting sick with symptoms of COVID-19.

Employees must be trained on what to do if they or a guest becomes unwell. If management is alerted to a suspected case of COVID-19 at the restaurant, medical advice should be sought by phone. Further information is available on the HSE website.

Delivery of food ingredients and food products

All delivery personnel must follow the Government's Public Health advice on physical distancing when picking up and dropping off deliveries:

- Wear suitable clean and protective clothing where necessary.
- Maintain a high degree of personal cleanliness.
- Clean hands before and after each delivery transaction. The use of gloves is not recommended as this can give a false sense of security. Hand washing is best practice.

If possible, delivery drivers should not be allowed to enter the site (with the exception of food deliveries which adhere to HACCP delivery protocols). Employees must not come in close contact with drivers.

Physical distancing in the work environment

Physical distancing is very important to help slow the spread of COVID-19. This is achieved by minimising contact between potentially infected individuals and healthy individuals. In a controlled environment, such as restaurants and cafés, physical distancing of at least 2-metres (unless the requirements outlined in Appendix 1 have been met, in which case a minimum of 1 metre is sufficient) is required between tables.

As far as reasonably possible, a distance of 2 metres – and a minimum of 1 metre should be maintained between staff. Where 2 metres is not possible all other measures to protect staff should be in place.

Where the food services environment makes it difficult to physically distance, employers need to consider what measures to put in place to protect employees.

Examples of practical measures to adhere to physical distancing guidance in the food services environment are to:

- stagger workstations on either side of service area so that food workers are not facing one another;
- provide PPE if required, such as face masks, disposable gloves and clean overalls. The use of PPE would be routine in high-risk areas of food premises that produce ready-to-eat and cooked foods. When staff are dressed in PPE it is possible to reduce distance between workers;
- limit the number of staff in a food preparation area at any one time;
- organise staff into working groups or teams to facilitate reduced interaction between groups.

Physical barriers, can be useful, such as sneeze guards/plexiglass and partitions, particularly in areas where it is difficult for individuals to remain apart, for example in restaurant kitchens and at cash registers, host stands, food pickup areas or between tables where maintaining physical distance is difficult. These physical barriers need to be regularly cleaned.

Open food display

There is currently no scientific evidence suggesting that food is associated with transmission of the COVID-19 virus, including open food displays.

It is important to maintain good hygiene practices around open food displays, such as salad bars, fresh produce displays and bakery products. Both customers and staff should strictly observe good personal hygiene practices at all times around open food areas.

Appendix 1 Controlled and uncontrolled environments [1]

Controlled environments

Public and private venues or workplaces are considered 'controlled' environments. Examples are workplaces, schools, museums, swimming pools, galleries, cinemas, stadiums, conference facilities and casinos. Food businesses are considered 'controlled' environments, which includes restaurants and cafes.

Requirements (for food businesses) **in controlled environments**

- Use additional signage to ask customers not to enter if they have symptoms

- Regulate entry so that the premises do not become overcrowded. Encourage pe-booking as much as possible. A text may be sent to remind the guest to stay away if unwell.

- Use floor markings inside the premises to facilitate compliance with the social distancing advice of 2 metres, particularly in the most crowded areas, such as serving counters and tills

- Use vertical signage to direct customers to facilitate movement within the premises while maintaining 2 metre distance

- Make regular announcements to remind customers to follow social distancing advice and clean their hands regularly

- Place plexiglass barriers at tills and counters if feasible, as an additional element of protection for workers and customers

- Adequate hand hygiene and toilet facilities. Provide additional pop-up hand hygiene stations or facilities if possible, providing soap, water and hand sanitiser

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[1] Source: Ministry of Health, New Zealand. https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-information-specific-audiences/guidelines-businesses-and-services-alert-level-2

- Establish and supervise a schedule of frequent cleaning of bathrooms and frequently touched surfaces
- Customers should be seated at a table except when using the toilet, paying, and departing.
- Clear signage should indicate the location of and route to the bathrooms
- Limit the number of servers per group of guests to the smallest number that is practical.
- There is a limit of on the number of people gathering in a venue at one time – in line with NPHET guidance on indoor gatherings. Multiple gatherings are allowed in venue facilities provided they are in separate 'defined spaces' and there are systems to prevent intermingling in common spaces (e.g., entrances, exits and toilet facilities).
- Keep contact details for the person making the booking. Explain that the reason for keeping these records is to provide them to Public Health for contact tracing in the event that someone becomes ill with COVID-19. These records should be kept for 1 month.
- Physical distancing of 2-metres should be maintained between tables. However, if this is not possible, this can be reduced to 1 metre in controlled environments if all of the other risk mitigations requirements outlined have been met AND pre-booked time-limited slots are in place, which are a maximum of 1 hour 45 minutes duration. There should be a minimum of 15 minutes between bookings in order to allow for adequate cleaning and to allow customers to leave and enter, without mixing.
- Physical distancing of at least 1 metre should be maintained between people seated at tables.
- Encourage the use of contactless payments where possible, without disadvantaging older or vulnerable customers
- Use disposable menus or laminated menus that can be adequately cleaned after each use.
- Unnecessary items should be removed from tables and single use rather than shared condiments should be provided.

Considerations:

- Where at all practical, workers should provide services to only 1 gathering and should not move between multiple gatherings in different venue locations (e.g. two different function rooms).
- Where possible, facilities such as toilets should not be used simultaneously by multiple gatherings. However, if they are cleaned in between usage, they may be used separately by different gatherings, within the same time period.

Uncontrolled environments

These are settings where people have open access to the premises and generally don't know each other and are unlikely to be in close contact with each other for an extended period of time. Examples are supermarkets, retail stores, shopping malls, and takeaway-only food outlets.

Requirements:

- Physical distancing of 2-metres for customers (who are not close friends or family).
- As far as reasonably possible, physical distancing of 2 metres – and a minimum of 1 metre -should be maintained between workers.
- Keep contact tracing records for workers.

Considerations:

- As much as possible use contactless payment systems to limit physical contact

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