

Talking Points: COVID-19's Effect on the Meat Supply

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Can I get COVID-19 by eating contaminated food or meat or Is it safe to eat food/meats if it has been handled by a worker with COVID-19?

According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), there is no evidence that COVID-19 can be contracted through food. Currently, there is no evidence of the disease being transmitted through food or meat. COVID-19 is a respiratory illness contracted via person-to-person contact. Traditional food safety measures (especially proper hand washing) and thorough cooking should always be followed.

Can I get sick by handling food and/or meat packages if COVID-19 has contaminated the surface?

According to the FDA and USDA, there is no evidence of COVID-19 being transmitted through food/meat packages. In addition, according to the FDA, you do not have to wash your food containers to prevent COVID-19 infection. Never try to wash meat in the sink and/or spray/dip food products into chemicals commonly used for household cleaning. To ensure safety, you should always wash your hands or use hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol content as soon as you can after handling packages or leaving a retail establishment. Be sure to disinfect food preparation areas according to chemical manufacture recommendations.

Can COVID-19 be transmitted through imported food or packaging from COVID-19 positive countries?

According to the FDA and USDA there is no evidence of COVID-19 being transmitted through imported foods, meats, or packaging.

I'm hearing about meat plants being closed due to workers contracting COVID-19, will this cause meat shortages?

The meat industry is devoted to maintaining the supply chain. Although some plants have temporarily closed and others have slowed production, the meat industry began to prepare for interruptions in the supply chain once the coronavirus began to spread globally. Currently, the industry does not foresee any interruptions in the supply chain. Those meat processing plants that have closed are deep cleaning, beyond traditional cleaning and sanitizing measures, as well as working with the state and local health departments to reopen as soon as it is safe. Consumers should not panic buy or stockpile meats but maintain traditional buying patterns.

What is the meat industry doing to maintain the supply chain?

Overall total meat sales have declined, but retail sales have and continue to increase. The temporary closure of restaurants and other food service establishments have caused overall total meat sales to decline. However, restaurant and food service meats are being transferred to meet the needs of retail grocery stores. In addition, the USDA-Food Safety and Inspection Service is working with the industry to help ensure that the supply chain remains intact and safe. Moreover, the meat industry, is working very hard to maintain the meat supply. Consumers can help the meat industry to maintain consistent supplies by avoiding panic buying or stockpiling.

What are meat plants doing to help their workers remain healthy during the pandemic?

Social distancing has become the new buzz word. Part of the reason some meat plants are reducing production is to institute and enforce social distancing. Most plants are staggering shifts, breaks, and lunch times, along with installing tents, to allow workers to social distance. Furthermore, they are taking temperatures and overall health assessments of each worker at the beginning of each shift, and workers are required to wear masks, gloves, and eye protection. Plastic dividers are also being installed when social distancing is not possible. Workers that do become ill are still receiving pay while they recover.

What is the USDA – Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) doing to maintain the meat supply and staying healthy?

Mandatory meat inspection is the law. The USDA-FSIS is working with the meats industry to make sure meat inspectors are present at all inspected processing facilities. If an inspector becomes ill, a replacement or relief inspector is sent to fulfil the duties; even inspectors that have been promoted from day-to-day line inspection are returning to meet the needs. In addition, the FSIS is working with state and local health departments to reopen closed plants to make sure all workers are safe.

Overall thoughts

The meats industry, the USDA, and farmers are trying to maintain the supply chain. Understandably, the media is reporting on the meat plant closures and slowed production. Please understand everyone is trying to make sure safe, healthy food is available to consumers. Meat plants that have closed are testing employees for COVID-19, performing deep cleanings in the plants, instituting safety measures including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), promoting social distancing, as well as working with state and local health departments to reopen as soon as possible. Consumers can help by avoiding panic buying and stockpiling. By working together, we can make sure there is plenty for everyone.