

COVID-19 Guidelines for Operating a Food Program

Guidelines for operating food programs in the Community Food Assistance Network of Waterloo Region

This resource provides guidelines for emergency food providers operating a food program. **Please contact your local Public Health Inspector** before initiating any food programs. If you are not sure who your inspector is, call Region of Waterloo Public Health and Emergency Services at 519-575-4400 and ask to speak to an inspector. The Public Health Inspector will work with you to determine how the program can operate safely, what measures need to be taken, and advise you on compliance with the [Ontario Food Premises Regulation](#).

If re-opening a facility that has not been used since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, preparations should include:

- A thorough cleaning of the facility
- Cleaning refrigerators and freezer units and discarding all food products past their best-before date
- Ensure that all food in storage is still in good condition (e.g., no evidence of pests such as droppings or gnaw marks on bags)
- Checking that food in freezer units do not show signs of having thawed (e.g., large ice crystals within packaging)

General considerations for operating a food program

Before offering the food program, consider your ability to follow the recommendations outlined in this resource and the current Provincial [Orders](#) and guidelines at covid-19.ontario.ca. Check the Ministry website regularly for the most up-to-date information.

Some things to consider for a food program include:

- **The space**
 - Is the setting large enough to run the program given the requirement for physical distancing? Staff and volunteers should be able to maintain physical distancing (2 metres/6 feet apart) while working.
- **The location**
 - Is it accessible for take-out services or curbside pick-up?
- **The availability of workers**
 - Workers who are over 70 years of age or workers (of any age) who have pre-existing health conditions may want to speak with their family physician

about the risk of working or volunteering in the community at this time and how they can stay safe.

- **The availability of hand hygiene supplies**
 - Is there enough soap, alcohol-based hand sanitizer, paper towels and cleaning products available for enhanced cleaning?

Specific recommendations

In addition to usual practices to maintain health and safety, food premises distributing food during the COVID-19 pandemic must take extra precautions to protect their health and the health of those around them. Consider the following recommendations:

Guidelines regarding the food premise (facility)

- Restrict the number of workers to allow for [physical distancing](#) between people.
 - Stagger start times, breaks and lunch times if necessary.
 - Limit the number of people working in one space at the same time.
- Minimize the number of people using the same piece of equipment when sharing equipment is necessary. All equipment must be washed, rinsed and sanitized between each use.
- Ensure there are hand washing stations stocked with the necessary supplies (e.g., soap and paper towel) and toilet facilities are available.
- Post signs in a visible location to provide information about:
 - [How to stop the spread of infection](#)
 - [Cleaning and disinfection practices](#)
 - [How to physical distance](#)
 - [Screening measures](#)
 - [Facility visitors](#)

You can find signage and posters at the [Ontario Ministry of Health](#) and [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) websites. For sector specific guidance and posters for preparing to re-open, visit the Ontario Government's [Resources to prevent COVID-19 in the workplace](#) webpage.

- Help participants maintain [physical distancing](#) while waiting for their food by using tape or other markers on the floor to show a 2 metre distance for where to stand.
- Provide food using contact-free measures. See information about pick-up procedures later in this resource.

Screen staff, volunteers and clients before entry into the facility

Ask these questions to help prevent the spread of COVID-19:

- Do you feel unwell, have signs of illness or [symptoms of COVID-19](#) such as fever, new or worsening cough, or shortness of breath?
- Have you travelled outside of Canada in the past 14 days?

- Have you had contact with a person who has tested positive for COVID-19? Anyone answering “yes” to any of these questions should not come to or enter the facility. They should be instructed to go home, [self-isolate](#) and use the [assessment tool](#) to determine if they need medical care or testing.

Keep staff and volunteers (workers) informed

- Workers must complete a COVID-19 self-screen before coming into work (see above) and to call and let the supervisor know if they won't be coming in.
- Inform workers that if they start to have symptoms while at the facility, they should immediately isolate themselves from others, notify the supervisor, go directly home, [self-isolate](#) and use the [self-assessment tool](#).
- Instruct workers to practice [physical distancing](#).
- Stress the importance of frequent [hand hygiene](#) (washing hands for 20 seconds with soap and water, or using alcohol-based [hand sanitizer](#)) and good [respiratory practices](#) (coughing or sneezing into a tissue or one's arm). Post proper hand washing instructions at hand washing sinks.
- Reinforce safe food handling practices and train workers as needed.
- Review infection prevention and control policies and procedures with all workers.

Clean and disinfect surfaces often

- Increase [cleaning and disinfection](#) in public high traffic areas, toilet facilities and commonly touched surfaces throughout the time the program is open.
- In addition to routine cleaning, frequently touched surfaces such as doorknobs, appliance handles, light switches, counters, sinks, serving utensils, table tops, food contact surfaces, trays, toilet handles, key pads, touch screens, elevator buttons and hand rails should be **cleaned at least twice a day** or more often as necessary.
- Cleaning and sanitizing of food handling/contact surfaces must follow requirements in the [Food Premises Regulations](#).
- Use [hard surface disinfectants](#) with an eight-digit Drug Identification Number (DIN). This indicates that the product is approved for use by Health Canada and is proven to be effective against the virus that causes COVID-19.
- Follow the manufacturer's instructions for cleaning and disinfection products for exposure, safety precautions and storage instructions.

The following is a list of other helpful resources to consider for cleaning and disinfecting:

- [Cleaning and disinfecting public spaces \(COVID-19\)](#) (Health Canada)
- [Best Practices for Environmental Cleaning for Prevention and Control of Infections in All Health Care Settings](#) (Public Health Ontario)

Guidelines when handling and distributing food

The risk of food being contaminated with the virus causing COVID-19 is low. There is currently no evidence that the virus is spread through food or from the packaging on food. There is also currently no evidence that it is necessary to wipe packaging, such as cans, with a disinfectant before opening or storing. However, it is possible to become infected by touching an object contaminated by the virus and then touching your face (especially the mouth, nose and eyes). Risk of contamination from food packaging can be reduced by following these tips:

- [Wash hands](#) both **before** and **after** handling food packaging.
- Remove unnecessary packaging and throw it into a garbage container with a lid.

Please refer to [Food Banks Canada Safe Food Handling Guidelines](#) for additional safe food handling information.

Adjust pick-up procedures according to the size, layout and location of the facility

- Limit the number of participants in the facility to meet the physical distancing requirements. Other participants should wait outside while maintaining physical distancing.
- Place physical distancing markers on the ground to indicate where patrons should stand.
- Consider offering individual appointment times for pick-up to prevent line-ups. Encourage participants to arrive at the given time to minimize the number waiting.
- For walk-in service, designate one doorway for entry and one doorway for exit. Consider leaving the food on the counter for the participant to pick up.
- If necessary, take the food outside to participants picking up their order.
- Consider providing curbside pick-up and encourage people to stay in their cars if possible.

Personal protection equipment

All employees and volunteers are required to wear a face covering while working indoors unless they have a medical exemption. Wearing a non-medical mask or face covering can help prevent spread of the virus by containing a person's own droplets, but will not protect one from getting the infection from another person. It is **not** a replacement for other measures and physical distancing and consistent hand washing must be adhered to as well.

Non-medical face masks or face coverings should:

- be made of at least three layers
 - Two layers should be tightly woven material fabric (such as cotton or linen)
 - The middle layer should be a filter type material such as a non-woven polypropylene fabric

- allow for easy breathing
- fit securely to the head with ties or ear loops
- maintain their shape after washing and drying
- be changed as soon as possible if damp or dirty
- be comfortable and not require frequent adjustment
- be large enough to completely and comfortably cover the nose and mouth without gaping

For training purposes, you can refer to the following videos:

- [Hand washing](#)
- [Putting on and removing a mask](#)

Gloves do not replace proper hand hygiene. Gloves, just like bare hands, can become easily contaminated. Gloves should be worn when a food handler has a bandage that is covering a wound, otherwise use is optional. If gloves are used, they should be worn properly in combination with handwashing.

If wearing gloves:

- Always wash with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds before putting gloves on and after taking them off.
- Hand sanitizer with at least 60 per cent alcohol may be used to serve pre-packaged food when no handwashing station is available.
- If the gloves become contaminated, they must be changed. For example, gloves must be changed if a worker performs a task such as taking out the garbage or if a worker touches a part of their exposed skin.
- Gloves should never be reused. Gloves must be thrown out after they have been taken off. Additional guidelines for community meal programs and soup kitchens

Follow usual [food safety measures](#), hygiene practices and the [Ontario Food Premises Regulation](#) while handling and preparing food, such as:

- [Wash hands](#) often. Ensure all hand wash sinks are supplied with liquid soap in a pump dispenser and paper towels or a working hot air dryer.
- [Wash produce under running water](#) and use a clean vegetable scrubber for hard vegetables with rough surfaces. **Never** use soap, detergent or chemicals to wash fruits and vegetables. Special produce cleansing products are not necessary.
- Use common [cleaning and disinfection](#) methods to kill coronaviruses.
- Cook food to [recommended safe internal temperatures](#).
- Avoid [cross-contamination](#) between cooked and uncooked foods.
- [Store, thaw](#) and [reheat](#) food properly.

Refer to the [food safety information](#) on the Health Canada website, to the Ontario Ministry of Health [COVID-19 Guidance for Food Premises](#) resource, [Region of Waterloo](#)

[Restaurants and Food Services Guidelines](#) and to [Food Banks Canada Safe Food Handling Guidelines](#).

Provide meals for take-out

Until sit-down service can resume, only delivery or take-out food can be offered by programs. Provide individual servings of food.

- Consider pre-packaging more than one portion in a container for those who have access to a refrigerator or freezer, so they don't have to come as often.
- All food provided for take-out or delivery should be packaged in a food grade container to protect it from contamination.
- Provide single-use, pre-wrapped utensils.
- Any condiments provided should be single-use, pre-wrapped products.
- When giving the food, inform participants that the food should be eaten or refrigerated within two hours. For pick-up procedures, refer to the above.
- Labelling the container is not required. However, you may want to consider labelling it with some or all of the following information:
 - The date the food is prepared and packaged.
 - A "use by" date for those refrigerating the food.
 - List of main ingredients, including the names of common food allergens such as egg, fish, milk, peanut, soy, sesame, shellfish, tree nut, or wheat.
 - Number of servings, if offering more than single portions.
 - Instructions to re-heat refrigerated food to at least 74 degrees Celsius before eating.

Note: if not labelling the container, the above information should be available to provide to a program participant on request.

- If offering off-site delivery service:
 - Schedule a delivery time, when possible.
 - Leave the package of food outside of the door and notify the participant by phone or via text or email that the package has been delivered.
 - The delivery person should use hand sanitizer or wash their hands before and after each delivery.

Additional guidance for residential settings

In living settings where people share kitchen facilities, it is recommended that:

- Only one person or family uses the kitchen at a time; it should be cleaned and disinfected after each use.
- Individuals (other than a family unit) eat together only if physical distancing is possible. If not possible, consider these options:
 - Eating at different times (shifts) and cleaning all surfaces between each sitting.
 - Serving individual meals for people to eat in their rooms.
- Remove shared food containers from the kitchen and eating areas, such as water pitchers and salt and pepper shakers.
- Provide snacks directly to residents or use pre-packaged food.

For more information, see [Guidance for group homes and co-living settings](#)

Residents should only have access to pre-packaged food from a shared cupboard in a group home or residential setting if residents are not ill, the facility is not in outbreak and if they are able to maintain physical distancing, hand wash, and can disinfect the area afterwards. Use must be monitored to ensure these rules are being followed.

Stay up-to-date with current information

The COVID-19 pandemic is evolving rapidly; guidance is subject to change. For current provincial guidelines, see the [Ministry of Ontario guidance documents](#).

Get information from credible sources. Stay up-to-date with information about COVID-19 from the [Public Health website](#).

References

Ontario Food Premises Regulation 493/17:

<https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/170493>

Government of Canada: Cleaning and disinfecting public spaces during COVID-19

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/cleaning-disinfecting-public-spaces.html>

Government of Canada: Non-medical masks and face coverings

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks/about-non-medical-masks-face-coverings.html>

Government of Canada: Risk-informed decision-making guidelines for workplaces and businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/guidance-documents/risk-informed-decision-making-workplaces-businesses-covid-19-pandemic.html>

Government of Canada food safety information for COVID-19

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-nutrition/food-safety/covid19.html>

Health Canada: Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Prevention and risks

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks.html?topic=tilelink>

Ontario Ministry of Health COVID-19 Guidance for Food Premises

http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/2019_food_premise_guidance.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Health Guidance document for essential workplaces

http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/2019_essential_workplaces_guidance.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Health Guidance for group homes and co-living settings

http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/2019_group_homes_guidance.pdf

Region of Waterloo Public Health and Emergency Services

COVID-19 Recommendations for Food Delivery and Take-Out

Coronavirus resources for workplaces



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