



COVID-19 and your workforce

Guidelines for the food processing industry

October 2020



Disclaimer

Information found in these guidelines has been gathered from Commonwealth and State Government websites, international organisations including the World Health Organization and the US Food and Drug Administration, and industry and university sources.

While care has been taken preparing these guidelines, they do not constitute legal advice or advice from public health officials. Always follow current government advice and announcements.

As the situation changes, these guidelines may need to be revised because of new information or changed requirements by Government.

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1. Introduction to COVID-19

COVID-19 is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus which originated in China in late November 2019. Coronaviruses are a family of viruses responsible for respiratory illnesses in humans, ranging from the common cold to much more severe illnesses such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).

Coronaviruses require an animal or human host for growth, they cannot grow in food. Health authorities confirm that it is highly unlikely that this virus is spread by food or food packaging. You get COVID-19 from people, so it is necessary to ensure that our food industry employees and teams are protected from this virus and remain functional.

The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus is most likely to be spread by:

- direct contact with someone who is actively infected
- close contact with a person with a confirmed infection who coughs or sneezes
- touching objects or surfaces contaminated with mucous/droplets from a cough or sneeze from an infected person and then touching your mouth or face.

Food businesses need to be vigilant about their responsibilities to their employees as well as consumers. So AIFST has developed these guidelines to assist food processors to mitigate the risks to employees presented by the COVID-19 virus. This includes:

- protecting the health of your employees, their families, and the broader community
- ensuring the uninterrupted supply of food to Australian consumers
- facilitating, as far as possible, business continuity, ensuring business survival and safeguarding job security for your workforce.

2. COVID-19 and occupational health and safety

The model Work Health and Safety (WHS) laws require Australian employers to take care of the health, safety and welfare of workers, contractors, and others (clients, customers, visitors) at their workplace. During the pandemic, this includes eliminating the risk of exposure to COVID-19 if reasonably practicable¹.

This presents a challenge for the food industry because of the layout and working conditions that prevail in many businesses. Large clusters of COVID-19 infections in meatworks in the United States, Germany, and Australia reflect situations where personnel work in close proximity to other workers; congregating in lunchrooms, change rooms, and other amenities; and when entering and exiting food processing plants.

These laws require the protection of workers from the risk of exposure to COVID-19 by:

- Informing employees of procedures and policies to limit the spread of the virus
- Requiring workers to practice physical distancing in the workplace
- Requiring workers to practice good hygiene and providing access to hygiene facilities
- Requiring workers to stay home when sick
- Thoroughly cleaning and sanitising the workplace on a regular basis
- Facilitating working from home arrangements where practical.

Keeping up to date during the pandemic

It is essential that food businesses stay up to date with and follow advice from local State or Territory health authorities and keep employees informed with regular advice and updates.

The Federal government is continually updating information on COVID-19. Go to <https://www.australia.gov.au/> and www.health.gov.au/covid19-resources. You may also connect with the Coronavirus Health Information Line (1800 020 080) which operates 24 hours/day, 7 days/week.

If translating or interpreting services are required, call 131 450. There is also a Coronavirus Australia app which provides a symptom checker, current status information, advice, and alerts and the COVIDSafe app. Both are available on Apple and Android platforms.

Food businesses must protect their employees, their work colleagues, and their families, to ensure Australians have access to a dependable and safe food supply

Maintaining an informed and engaged workforce

During this COVID-19 pandemic, you must keep your workforce intact and this means identifying strategies for minimising their risk of infection.

¹ Safe Work Australia – COVID-19 information for workplaces <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/covid-19-information-workplaces/industry-information/general-industry-information/duties-under-whs>

A critical requirement is to keep all workers, contractors, and others (clients, customers, visitors) at the workplace informed of the risks and aware of preventative measures relevant to COVID-19.

This includes the provision of regular updates and reminders, so workers understand what they need to do to protect themselves and prevent the spread of COVID-19. This includes

- Ensuring all staff have training on general hygiene specific to your products
- Making sure employees practice good hand and sneeze/cough hygiene, including:
 - Washing their hands frequently with soap and water, before commencing work, after going to the toilet, and before and after eating
 - Covering their coughs and sneezes e.g. using a clean tissue (or into their elbow) then hygienic disposal of tissues and follow-up with a hand sanitiser
 - Avoiding touching their face, especially their mouth, nose, and eyes
- Requiring all staff to declare when they are unwell and not attend the workplace.

Food safety measures that prevent food contamination (such as handwashing, clean protective clothing) also help to prevent the spread of COVID-19 between workmates.

Develop and implement a COVID-19 safe plan

Public health orders in certain states require businesses to develop a COVID-19 safe plan to operate. The purpose of such plans is to protect staff, contractors, and any customers and visitors entering the business.

COVID-19 safe plans are designed to establish a business's actions:

- To prevent the introduction of the coronavirus in your workplace
- To record contact details of all staff and others entering the workplace
- To ensure physical distancing recommendations are implemented
- To employ personal protective equipment, including face masks for your workforce
- To respond to a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 in your workplace

There are different plans for different industries, and various state agencies provide examples and templates to aid workplaces to meet these obligations. For further guidance see the following websites:

Victoria: <https://www.business.vic.gov.au/disputes-disasters-and-succession-planning/covid-safe-business/covid-safe-plan>

NSW: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/covid-19-safety-plan-food-processing.pdf>

Queensland: <https://www.covid19.qld.gov.au/government-actions/approved-industry-covid-safe-plans>

In some states, certain industries such as meat, poultry, and seafood processing and supermarket distribution centres are deemed high risk, and there may be additional requirements when developing a COVID-19 safe plan. Always check with the relevant state and territory authorities.

3. Preventing the introduction and spread of COVID-19


A key to maintaining your workforce during the pandemic is to ensure only healthy workers enter the workplace, and they practice good personal hygiene and maintain physical distancing guidelines.

Personnel in the food industry often work in close proximity to their co-workers, whether it is during harvest, fishing operations, packing and sorting raw materials, food processing operations, packaging, or warehousing and this raises the risk of infection. Review the layout and design of your facilities and reconfigure where feasible to ensure workers are more than 1.5 metres apart.


Also advise employees to avoid congregating in car parks, lunchrooms, offices, and especially in areas outside the workplace to minimise the chance of infection. Plus identify staff and roles that may be able to work remotely/from home (e.g. office/admin staff) but ensure that doing so will not compromise security or food safety.

There are several key strategies for managing worker movements and health and thereby maintaining your processing capacity – these include:

Restrict on-site access


	Implement more stringent access requirements for personnel entering your facility
	Screen all visitors and prohibit entry by non-essential visitors
	Entry should only be permitted for essential staff and contractors providing essential services e.g. maintenance crews, cleaners
	Exclusions may need to be extended to include auditors - communicate with auditors and seek their understanding

Health and temperature checks

	Check staff health, and if practical check their temperature before entering and leaving your premises using a laser/infrared thermometer
	Ask employees if they are unwell or experiencing COVID-19 symptoms before the commencement of their shift
	Retain records of staff tested and have them wear a badge or sticker identifying them as having been tested each shift
	Temperature checks enable the business to identify any staff with an elevated temperature so they can be referred to public health authorities for further advice

Personal protective equipment (PPE)

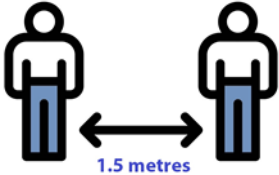
Guidance on the use of PPE is evolving, so regularly check on recommendations provided by the Australian Government Department of Health.

	<p>It is recommended that you reinforce existing company practices regarding the use of personal protective equipment</p>
	<p>Face masks have gained widespread acceptance as a means of minimising transmission of infections like coronavirus – their use in food processing environments is strongly encouraged*</p>
	<p>Various types of face masks are available including surgical masks, and reusable cloth masks – always follow instructions regarding their correct use and disposal or laundering</p>
	<p>Face shields when worn with a properly fitted mask, offer droplet protection from contamination to others, as well as to the wearer – they must be correctly sanitised or disposed of after each use</p>

* In some jurisdictions the use of face masks may be compulsory

Food businesses must monitor their employees to ensure PPE is maintained in working order and is always correctly worn.

Minimise close contacts in food processing facilities


	<p>Minimise the number of immediate close contacts each employee might be exposed to during their working day</p>
	<p>Explore ways that minimise contact between workers and between different work teams– including avoidance of intermingling of personnel from different workgroups or zones in the facility e.g. have the same staff work next to each other during each shift where possible</p>
	<p>Restrict employees to defined lunchrooms and amenities where possible – practice physical distancing, stagger break times, and fully clean facilities after usage</p>
	<p>Discourage sharing items such as food, tools, equipment, or supplies by workers</p>
	<p>Minimise the number and duration of face-to-face meetings (cease where possible) – any essential meetings should be limited to less than 15 minutes</p>

There is also specific advice for on-farm personnel in the Australian agriculture sector, developed by various industry organisations, including the following:


- [Guidelines for the fresh produce industry](#) – PMA Australia New Zealand
- [Guide to COVID-19 in the Orchard & Packing Shed](#) – Citrus Australia
- [Information for dairy farm owners and employees](#) – Dairy Australia
- [CoVID-19 and your workforce](#) – Australian Pork Limited

These guides address minimising close contacts during crop production and harvesting and animal production, and include advice on segregating crews, modifying harvest schedules, staggering work times, organising separate amenities, and provision of hand washing and sanitising stations in the field. In the fresh produce sector, there is also the challenge of managing accommodation, shared facilities, and transport for seasonal workers.

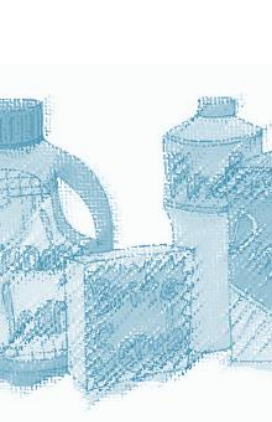
Worker transport

	Ensure transport arrangements for workers do not present a risk to their health
	Discourage car-pooling arrangements
	If car-pooling or ridesharing is unavoidable, limit it to those sharing accommodation or those working in the same teams or crews

Adopt good hand hygiene practices

	Promote and practice effective hand washing and hand hygiene
	Conduct refresher staff training in effective hand washing technique
	Provide hand washing amenities (including alcohol-based hand sanitiser) for staff on entry and exit to the business, and in common staff areas – change rooms, toilets, and lunchrooms
	Place signs or posters at hand wash stations to remind staff of effective hand washing technique
	Ensure adequate supplies of soap, paper towels, hand sanitisers, disinfectant wipes, etc to support healthy hygiene behaviours


Cleaning and sanitation

	Optimise and rigorously follow cleaning and sanitation procedures
	The Australian Government has published Environmental cleaning and disinfection principles for COVID-19 – review and determine whether you need to revise cleaning and sanitation procedures
	<p>Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> enhancing cleaning and sanitation programs between shifts increased frequency of cleaning and sanitising common areas (lunchrooms, change areas, etc.) sanitising frequently touched surfaces and equipment e.g. handrails, door handles, light switches, computer keyboards, touch screens, etc.
	Review your entire facility to identify zones, food contact surfaces, and equipment that may have been overlooked in your existing cleaning program, or are now relevant in the context of COVID-19

4. Staff responsibilities


Employees also have a duty to diligently practice behaviours that reduce their potential exposure to the virus – thereby protecting themselves, their fellow workers, and their families. Instruct them about the symptoms of COVID-19 illness, and what to do should they experience symptoms of illness.

Staff responsibilities if infected (or think they may be infected)

	Ensure staff know the symptoms of COVID-19
	Symptoms are often seasonal flu-like and include: Fever, cough, sore throat, fatigue, and unusual/unexplained shortness of breath
	Advise staff what they must do if they experience symptoms indicating infection
	If staff experience cold or flu symptoms they should not go to work – they should immediately self-isolate and seek medical attention
	If a staff member experiences symptoms while at work, they should immediately report to their supervisor/manager then go home

Employees who are unwell should contact their doctor or call **Health Direct** on 1800 022 222. The Health Direct website also provides a helpful Coronavirus (COVID-19) [Symptom Checker](#).


When making an appointment with your doctor, let them know your symptoms so they can prepare appropriate infection control measures before you attend their surgery or clinic.

	Further guidance for staff experiencing COVID-19 symptoms
	Do not travel on public transport or visit public places
	Advise your supervisor of the outcome of any medical investigation of your condition <i>i.e.</i> the results of a test for COVID-19
	Do not return to work while you are waiting for a test result, and only return when you have evidence that you are OK
	Do not go to work if you are a close contact of someone who has confirmed COVID-19


It is essential you advise your employer as soon as possible after you develop symptoms, including when precisely you believe you may have started exhibiting symptoms so that work teams can be quickly isolated. Seek medical advice and adhere to all instructions given by medical authorities.

Your medical records are confidential, and employers must not disclose to co-workers the medical status of any individual.

Staff health: seasonal flu vaccination

	<p>Encourage all staff to get the seasonal flu vaccination (consider providing the vaccination to all staff)</p>
	<p>Health authorities are strongly advising all Australian to get the seasonal flu vaccine</p>
	<p>While the seasonal flu vaccination does not protect you from COVID-19, the symptoms of seasonal flu and COVID-19 can look the same, so protection against seasonal flu minimises the possibility of confusion and reduces alarm and disruption in the workplace</p>

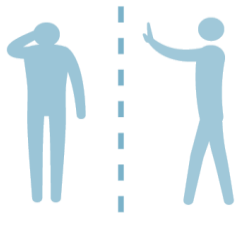
Staff returning from international travel

	<p>Obtain confirmation from employees and essential visitors (including contractors) that they have not been overseas in the past 14 days</p>
	<p>Strictly enforce stand down periods for employees returning from international travel (14-day period of self-isolation at home)</p>
	<p>Revoke access for employees known to have travelled internationally, until they complete a 14-day period of self-isolation</p>
	<p>Consider asking staff to get a doctor's clearance before returning to work following international travel</p>

5. Protocols if an employee is infected with COVID-19

If a member of your workforce is confirmed positive for COVID-19, it is recommended that your food business adheres to the following advice. **Note:** this does not constitute official advice, and you should heed any directions and guidance provided by public health officials.

Immediately self-isolate all close contacts of confirmed infections


	<p>What is a close contact?</p> <p>A close contact is anyone who has been within 1.5 metres of an infected person for a cumulative period of at least 2 hours at any time in the 24 hours prior to that person first experiencing symptoms.</p> <p>Close contact also includes face-to-face contact for a period of 15 minutes. This type of contact is more likely to occur in staff common areas e.g. lunchrooms.</p>
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Contact your State or Territory health department for the latest official advice as to what self-isolation means in the context of ensuring food supply continuity, and what the contacted individuals need to do next. If there is a confirmed case in your workforce, you will also need to liaise with the local public health unit as well as your food safety regulator for advice and guidance.

Employees who feel they are at higher risk due to age (65 and over) or who have an underlying medical condition, such as diabetes, respiratory issues or heart disease, should be allowed (but not required) to stay home, as a precaution.


Isolation of close contacts can mean an entire work team is stood down, and this will have a major impact on your business continuity.

What if an employee reports sick with COVID-19 symptoms, but is not yet confirmed to be infected?

	<p>Quickly identify close contacts of the employee</p> <p>Assemble records of who the employee had close contact with over the days prior to developing symptoms</p> <p>Retain records of who has worked where, when, and with whom</p> <p>Implement a system for recording who each employee has had close contact with (as defined above) during each shift so you can quickly identify who may or may not have had close contact with a potentially infected staff member</p> <p>Consider supplementary approaches, such as providing employees with a form/logbook to be completed at the end of each shift in which they record all personnel who they were in close contact within the course of their shift – including during breaks</p>
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Preparing for staff to return to work

Someone who has completed official quarantine or has been released from their 14-day period of isolation does not pose a risk of infection to other people, and may return to work

	<p>Return to work</p> <p>Where staff have been infected with COVID-19, ensure they have a doctor's clearance before returning to work</p> <p>Where staff are returning, it is important to reassure their colleagues that their reintroduction into the workplace is safe</p> <p>Reinforce the need for employees to continue with good hygiene practices, both in the workplace and at home</p>
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6. Contingency arrangements

During the pandemic, employers in the food industry face a number of challenges, including disruptions to supply chains and services, a diminished workforce, and the ongoing need to recruit and train new staff.

Suppliers and services

Consider what supplies and services may be disrupted and identify options that may minimise disruption *e.g.*, alternative suppliers. Critical services and supplies include: personal protective equipment, cleaning agents, sanitisers, packaging materials, transport, and auditors.

Risk assess alternative suppliers of ingredients/packaging and expand your approved supplier program to avoid lengthy trial periods for alternative suppliers.

Importantly, minimise potential contact between service providers such as transporters and sales representatives, and your workforce.

Diminished workforce

Plan for how you will continue to operate if your workforce is significantly reduced through COVID-19 infections, or because of a large number of staff being in isolation due to contact with an infected person.

If you are faced with a serious shortage of labour, can your existing workforce be used differently or upskilled?

Recruiting and training new staff

In the event of a loss of staff, consider how you may rapidly find and upskill replacement staff. With many people from other sectors out of work, there may be options to recruit them – so start planning for how this could be achieved.

Identify measures which would allow you to speed up and scale up training for new employees. Plus identify current staff who could be cross-trained or step up to supervisory roles if needed – provide training/mentoring to help these individuals step into these roles.


Communication with your direct customers

Ensure your customers along the food supply chain are informed about your preparedness and contingency plans. Particularly if you deal directly with foodservice or retailers.

7. Support your workforce

Support your workforce to cope and be resilient during this time.

Follow-up regularly with any employees who are infected or in self-isolation to ensure they feel supported and have access to relevant information. This includes encouraging unaffected employees to provide support to colleagues that may be in self-isolation or recovering from the infection.

 A graphic showing the word "SUPPORT" spelled out using blue, 3D-style letter blocks. The letters are slightly staggered and cast soft shadows on the surface below them.	R U OK?
	Communicate regularly with staff
	People find self-isolation difficult – contact them
	Give your colleagues a call to make sure they are coping and feel supported
	Promote employees eating healthily, exercising regularly, getting proper sleep, and finding time to relax

8. Implementation

Implementation of these guidelines will require consideration of the processes and facilities in your food business and adjustments to meet specific needs and circumstances.

Implementation will be guided by what is feasible, practical, acceptable, and tailored to the needs of each workplace. These considerations will need to take into consideration any local and State health and safety laws, rules, and regulations with which the business must comply.

9. Resources

CHECKLIST FOR FOOD PROCESSORS

The checklist is for food processors for use as part of their effort to contain the spread and limit the impact of the COVID-19 virus.

Key considerations:

- Maintaining the health and wellbeing of you, your staff, and your family
- Ensuring your work teams remain intact and keep your business functioning
- Identifying ways to work that are consistent with current best hygienic practice
- Retaining access to goods and services

No.	Question	Yes It is in place	Yes But it could be improved	No Need to do something	No Not relevant
1	A safe working environment has been provided for all staff in your business				
2	Precautions are in place for your workers or family who are over 60 or in a high-risk group (underlying medical conditions)				
3	Ensure all workers are briefed on ways of working and can demonstrate them in practice – physical distancing, hygienic coughing/sneezing, etc				
4	Workers are provided with appropriate personal protective equipment – gloves, masks, etc as appropriate				
5	Hand washing facilities and hand sanitisers are provided and regularly maintained				
6	Workers who are sick understand the need to self-isolate				
7	Systems are in place to isolate work teams if a team member tests positive				
8	Visitors are not permitted on site				
9	Contractors are appropriately briefed and follow all hygiene protocols when on site				
10	Government and relevant industry websites are regularly checked for the latest precautions and advice designed to control the virus				
11	An up-to-date list of key contacts and phone numbers: Department of Health, Regulator, local doctors, and hospitals is maintained				

7 STEPS TO REDUCE COVID-19 TRANSMISSION

ACTIONS FOR FOOD INDUSTRY EMPLOYEES

1. Do not come to work if you are unwell
2. Upon arrival at your workplace, wash your hands thoroughly using warm water and soap, then dry your hands. Use hand sanitiser where recommended
3. **Repeat** step 2 on a regular basis
4. Avoid touching your mouth, nose, and eyes and practice good sneezing/coughing hygiene
5. Follow physical distancing recommendations (at least 2 metres) where feasible and limit close interactions with your fellow workers
6. Adhere to documented cleaning and sanitation programs throughout the entire production facility
7. If you develop a fever, cough, or shortness of breath, inform your supervisor and self-isolate immediately

Useful websites with COVID-19 information

Australian Government Department of Health	https://www.health.gov.au/
Victorian Department of Health and Human Services	https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus
NSW Department of Health	https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx
NSW Government Food Authority	https://www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/help/covid-19-advice-for-businesses
Queensland Department of Health	https://www.health.qld.gov.au/
Safe Food Production Queensland	https://www.safefood.qld.gov.au/covid-19-advice/
South Australia Health	https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public+content/sa+health+internet
Western Australian Government	https://www.wa.gov.au/government/document-collections/covid-19-coronavirus-food-businesses-and-licensed-premises
Tasmanian Government	https://www.coronavirus.tas.gov.au/keeping-yourself-safe/food-and-drinks
Northern Territory Government	https://coronavirus.nt.gov.au/roadmap-new-normal/business/food
Food Standards Australia New Zealand	https://www.foodstandards.gov.au/consumer/safety/Pages/NOVEL-CORONAVIRUS-AND-FOOD-SAFETY.aspx
World Health Organization	https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019 https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/covid-19-and-food-safety-guidance-for-food-businesses
United States Food and Drug Administration	https://www.fda.gov/food/food-safety-during-emergencies/food-safety-and-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html
United Kingdom Food Standards Agency	https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/reopening-and-adapting-your-food-business-during-covid-19



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