

# Covid-19: protecting key food industry workers from infection

The global Covid-19 pandemic is having an impact on us all. To ensure the continued provision of key products and services at this time, governments around the world have identified 'key workers' whose activities are critical to the Covid-19 response. These include those involved in food production, food processing, and food distribution, sale and delivery. It also includes those providing products and services essential to the maintenance of good hygiene in the food industry.

by The Hygiene Team, Vikan, UK.  
[www.vikan.com](http://www.vikan.com)

The decision to designate these workers as 'key' reflects the importance of maintaining the continuous supply of safe, quality food to the population.

At a recent WHO (World Health Organisation, [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)) webinar on coronavirus it was said that, after those working in the health care sector, key workers in the food sector were the second most critical.

Consequently, ensuring the health and well-being of the individuals that deliver these goods and services is essential.

## What is Covid-19?

Covid-19 is the disease associated with a new strain of coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, that was discovered in Wuhan, China, in 2019.

SARS is the acronym for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, and CoV is that for coronavirus. This article uses the terms SARS-CoV-2 in reference to the virus, and Covid-19 in reference to the viral infection.

## How is it spread?

We know that the primary transmission route for SARS-CoV-2 is via inhalation of the aerosols and droplets created when an infected individual coughs or sneezes.

A single cough can produce up to



3,000 droplets. These droplets can land on the surrounding people, textiles and surfaces.

Transmission of the virus can then also occur through touching of the contaminated item, and subsequent touching of the mucous membranes of the mouth, nose or eyes.

A recent study has shown that SARS-CoV-2 (specifically) can remain viable on cardboard for up to 24 hours, and for 2-3 days on plastic and stainless-steel surfaces. However, copper surfaces inactivate the virus in about four hours.

**The primary transmission route for SARS-CoV-2 is via inhalation of the aerosols and droplets created when an infected individual coughs or sneezes (photo courtesy of James Gathany).**



Survival on clothing and hair is not yet known. However, virus viability on surfaces will depend on several factors, including the type of surface; the presence of organic material (biological fluids, biofilm, food debris); temperature; relative humidity; and the specific strain of the virus.

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) have stated that there is currently no evidence that food is a likely source or route of transmission of Covid-19.

Experiences from previous

outbreaks of related coronaviruses show that transmission through food consumption did not occur.

However, droplet and aerosols, created when an infected individual coughs or sneezes will settle on to the surface of unwrapped, ready to eat products, like fruit, vegetables and baked goods, and on to the surfaces that these foods are in contact with.

Equally, goods like these could have virus transferred to them via contaminated hands when handled.

At the recent WHO webinar on coronavirus it was suggested, as a precaution:

- To wash or peel fresh fruit and vegetables prior to consumption.
- That baked products be wrapped prior to display and sale.

If the products are hand packed, the hands should be thoroughly washed and dried before handling.

## Are key food industry workers at greater risk?

Many of those involved in the production, processing, distribution, sale and delivery of food and hygiene products and services are required to work in close contact with other people, in enclosed areas, for extended periods of time.

This puts them at greater risk of infection through aerosol transmission.

These individuals are also likely to frequently touch surfaces and equipment potentially infected (via touch, aerosols and droplets) by other workers or the public.

These would include door handles; handrails; door push plates; turnstiles; trolley and bucket handles; hoses; instrument panels; taps; cleaning tools and utensils; money; payment/loyalty cards; and shopping bags.

These surfaces will also extend into non-food handling areas such as toilets, changing rooms, offices, canteens and vehicles.

Given the recent scientific findings on SARS-CoV-2 survival on surfaces, these could also significantly increase key food industry workers' risk of Covid-19 infection.

*Continued on page 9*



**Cleaning has never been more important.**

*Continued from page 7*

**How can their risk of Covid-19 infection be minimised?**

As our understanding of the ways in which Covid-19 can be spread develops, so has the realisation that additional measures need to be taken to protect us all.

WHO recommend that everyone should:

- Wash their hands regularly.
- Cover their mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing.
- Avoid close contact (<2 metres) with anyone coughing and sneezing.

WHO have also recently published Interim guidance, in relation to control of Covid-19, specifically for food businesses<sup>1</sup>.

This guidance is primarily aimed at maintaining the integrity of the food chain and ensuring that adequate and safe food supplies are available for consumers, by limiting the spread of Covid-19 amongst key food industry workers.

WHO stress the importance of measures aimed at keeping the virus out of key worker environments, through raised awareness of Covid-19 symptoms; immediate reporting of any signs of illness; enforcement of fitness to work protocols; and exclusion from the workplace. They also stress the need for continued and additional measures to minimise the spread of infection, i.e., handwashing and respiratory etiquette; physical distancing of staff; and good hygiene and

sanitation practices, including more frequent sanitation of 'high touch points'.

Governments and regulatory bodies within each country are also issuing guidance on how to minimise the spread of SARS-CoV-2, including specific guidance for food businesses.

**UK government guidance**

The UK Government has recently issued the following guidance<sup>2</sup>, which covers:

- What you need to know about coronavirus and food.
- Food hygiene guidance.
- Food packaging.
- Cleaning and waste disposal.
- Managing employee sickness.
- Social distancing in specific food business settings.
- Effective cleaning and disinfection.

We have already seen many food industry manufacturers and retailers implementing their own measures to protect their workforce and the public from Covid-19.

These include, in manufacturing, the distancing of workers on lines, and provision of facemask/shields and local hand sanitiser stations; and, in supermarkets, distancing markers and one-way transit routes through stores for the public; the use of sanitiser wipes for cleaning of trolley and baskets handles; screens between till staff and the public; greater use of contactless payment



cards and restriction on the use of personal shopping bags.

Manufacturers of PPE (including face masks and gloves), cleaning chemicals and equipment, and those that distribute and sell them, are working around the clock to support food manufacturing and retail. These goods and services are essential to the continued provision of safe food. Consequently, similar steps are being taken to protect the staff involved in their delivery.

Cleaning has never been more important. The key workers at Vikan are deeply committed to continuing to provide professional grade cleaning tools to the food industry, to help them minimise the risk of

Covid-19 infection amongst their workforce and ensure the continued production of safe food. Vikan are prioritising the health and well-being of their employees by following appropriate guidance, and they encourage everyone to do the same.

As always, the Vikan Hygiene Team are providing support and advice to the industry through participation in online Covid-19 updates and forums, and their Technical Sales Teams are available to answer your hygiene questions and help you find the right solution. ■

References are available from the author on request

<sup>1</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-food-businesses/guidance-for-food-businesses-on-coronavirus-covid-19>

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.foodstandards.gov.scot/downloads/COVID-19\\_-\\_FSS\\_Guidelines\\_for\\_Food\\_Business\\_Operators\\_and\\_their\\_Employees\\_9\\_April\\_2020.pdf](https://www.foodstandards.gov.scot/downloads/COVID-19_-_FSS_Guidelines_for_Food_Business_Operators_and_their_Employees_9_April_2020.pdf)

**A single cough can produce up to 3,000 droplets. These droplets can land on the surrounding people, textiles and surfaces. Transmission of the virus can then also occur through touching of the contaminated item, and subsequent touching of the mucous membranes of the mouth, nose or eyes.**

