

March 26th, 2020

Recommendations for Minimizing COVID-19 Risk for Community-Based Food Programs.

We understand the importance of keeping food and community meal programs functioning during the COVID-19 emergency. This document is intended for community-based food programs including: soup kitchens; community kitchens; and non-profit organizations offering meals prepared and served to the public. This document is also based upon current knowledge and it should be understood that guidance is subject to change as new data become available and new developments arise with this new virus; furthermore, unique situations may require some discretion in adjusting these guidelines which are meant to be supportive, not prescriptive.

What is Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and how does it spread?

COVID-19 is a respiratory infection caused by a newly identified virus. The infection has symptoms similar to other respiratory illnesses, including the flu and common cold: cough, sneezing, fever, sore throat and difficulty breathing. While most people infected with COVID-19 experience only mild illness, severe illness can occur in some people. Older people and people with a weakened immune system or underlying medical condition are considered at higher risk of severe disease. COVID-19 is transmitted by droplets when a person coughs or sneezes in close contact with another person, or onto surfaces which are later touched by another. The virus can be spread by touch if a person has used their hands to cover their mouth or nose when they cough. At this time, the virus causing COVID-19 is not known to be airborne, and does not pass through the skin.

What Are the Symptoms?

While many of the characteristics of COVID-19 are still unknown, mild to severe illness has been reported for confirmed cases. The symptoms of COVID-19 are similar to other respiratory illnesses, including the flu and common cold. They include cough, sneezing, fever, sore throat and difficulty breathing.

COVID 19 PREVENTION AND CONTROL IN COMMUNITY BASED FOOD PROGRAMS (FAQs)

Q- What if a service staff/volunteer is sick?

- Tell your staff/volunteer that if they are sick with acute respiratory illness symptoms, they should remain at home and contact HealthLink BC at 8-1-1.
- If any staff member/volunteer is showing even mild new respiratory symptoms ask them to leave work immediately and have them contact 8-1-1 for further guidance.
- Staff/volunteers can also use the online [COVID-19 self-assessment tool](#) to know when to seek healthcare. We do not recommend returning to work. Further information can be found on the [BCCDC website](#).
- All areas used by ill staff/volunteers must be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized.

Q- What if an employee/volunteer has returned from travelling?

At this time the provincial government is recommending against all non-essential travel outside of Canada. As of March 12, 2020 anyone returning from international travel must self-isolate for 14 days (2 weeks) before returning to work. They do not need to be tested for COVID-19 before returning to work. Returning travellers are required to self-monitor for symptoms of respiratory illness including a cough, sneeze, fever, sore throat or difficulty breathing. Tell your staff/volunteers that if they are sick they should remain at home. Advise them to contact 8-1-1

Q- Should I do anything different to minimize risk of COVID-19 transmission?

There are a number of new things you should do, including:

1. Operate as a take-out or delivery service. All dining areas must be closed.
2. Encourage social distancing by:
 - posting signage to stay 6 feet (2 meters) apart
 - utilizing ropes and/or tape organize line ups and establish distances to prevent large congregations of people
 - consider extending service hours to minimize the number of clients at one time.
 - deploying personnel to manage social distancing
3. Provide single-use condiments
4. Consider simplifying meal preparation in order to assist with any potential reductions in staff/volunteer levels.
5. Enhance cleaning and sanitizing and review with all staff/volunteers. Increase cleaning (using a detergent) and sanitizing (with regular disinfecting solutions such as diluted bleach or a quaternary ammonium solution) of high-touch areas (such as tables, chairs, door knobs, faucets, and bathroom surfaces, payment pads etc...)

6. Ensure service areas are properly cleaned and sanitized at the start and end of the day.
7. Do not provide self-serve food to the public; have your staff/volunteers serve all foods.
8. Provide individuals with single use utensils.
9. Monitor to ensure staff/volunteers are practicing proper hygiene including frequent hand washing, and proper cough and sneeze etiquette (i.e. into elbows rather than hands).
10. Provide alcohol-based hand sanitizers for the public to use before receiving meals wherever possible.
11. Ensure washrooms have liquid soap, paper towels and warm running water at all times. Staff/ volunteers must properly wash hands with plain soap and warm water.
12. Place hand hygiene and cough and sneeze etiquette signs in line-ups and conspicuous areas.
13. Have goods delivered to a receiving area only rather than the service/prep areas and to transfer goods using minimal handling (i.e. a trolley).

Q- Should food handlers be using disposable gloves?

Frequent and proper handwashing is encouraged as the best way of preventing all viral respiratory infections and other foodborne illnesses. If a food premises chooses to use gloves, employees should wash their hands thoroughly before putting on the gloves. Change the gloves in between tasks (i.e. after cleaning, after handling garbage, before food handling, etc.). Wearing gloves does not exclude food handlers from washing their hands.

Q- Should staff/volunteers be wearing a mask and/or protective eyewear when serving foods?

No. Masks provide a protective barrier to reduce the risk of spreading viruses through droplets made by people when they cough or sneeze. Masks and protective eyewear are not needed for people who are not experiencing any symptoms such as cough, sneeze, fever or shortness of breath. Another reason masks and protective eyewear are not recommended are that they may cause you to touch your face more often. Staff/volunteers with symptoms cannot continue to work by wearing a mask; they must go home.

Q- What do we do if we notice that a client is sick?

Advise the client to contact 8-1-1, or use the BC COVID-19 self-assessment tool for further guidance, or seek medical attention where they normally go for medical attention if needed.

Q- Can COVID-19 be transmitted through food or food packaging?

The risk of transfer of coronavirus via food or food packaging is considered to be low. Carrying out hand washing prior to handling food and after handling food packaging will further minimize the risk.

Q- Are there any precautions necessary when doing meal or food delivery?

- For meal delivery service, consider increasing the number of meals provided to reduce the number of visits personnel need to make. Provide “drop at the door” service to avoid close contact with individuals that may be in isolation or symptomatic.
- When delivering food/meals:
 - Have premade packages ready for individuals/differing family sizes.
 - Do not divide items into smaller packages and provide only unopened packages.
 - If you typically provide 3-5 days of provisions, consider providing 1-2 weeks to Reduce the number of visits that people need to make.
 - Provide “drop at the door” service to avoid close contact with individuals who may be in quarantine or symptomatic

Q- How to handle money transactions safely?

Although money is not likely to be a primary mode of transmission of coronavirus, it may be possible to transfer the virus by touching contaminated money and then your eyes, mouth, or nose afterwards. Ensure that regular hand hygiene practices are followed after handling money and payment pads so that your risk of transmission is reduced. Payment pads should also be cleaned regularly.

Do you have further questions?

Please refer to our website for further up-to-date information on COVID-19:

<http://www.vch.ca/public-health/environmental-health-inspections>

There is a BC COVID-19 Symptom Self-Assessment Tool provided through the BC Ministry of Health:

<https://covid19.thrive.health/>

BCCDC information <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19>

BC Health File: https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/sites/hlbcprox-prod.health.gov.bc.ca/files/documents/healthfeature/hf_040_coronavirus_covid-19.pdf

Contact us with questions about food premises and health protection at 604-675-3800; if staff have individual health concerns, please call HealthLink BC at 8-1-1.

The province has created a phone service to provide **non-medical** information about COVID-19, including the latest information about travel recommendations and social distancing. Information is available in more than 110 languages, 7:30 am to 8:00 pm at **1-888-COVID19 (1-888-268-4319)** or via text message at **604-630-0300**.