



Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations

FOOD SAFETY GUIDELINES

Keeping workers safe along the food supply chain within acutely food insecure contexts

Webinar – 30 June 2021

SUMMARY POINTS, QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS



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Speakers



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Background

The webinar is part of the webinar series on Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) for COVID-19 prevention along the food value chain. This third webinar in the series was organized by the Knowledge Sharing Platform on Resilience (KORE) and the Global Programme Support Team of FAO's Office of Emergencies and Resilience, with support from and in collaboration with FAO's Food Systems and Food Safety Division, and the "Strengthening multi-sectoral coordination across relevant sectors to mitigate risks of COVID-19 transmission along the food supply chain" Working Group.

Introduction

Keeping food and food workers safe is even more complex during a global pandemic and all stakeholders must contribute to maintaining a 360° oversight of every aspect of the food supply chain. Workers in the food supply chain play an indispensable role in sustaining the movement of food along the supply chain. Therefore, keeping workers, production facilities, transport infrastructure and all other areas in the supply chain safe, is critical for mitigating the impacts of this unprecedented COVID-19 crisis.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in a longstanding partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), is involved in a range of initiatives to support global food safety and protect the health of both consumers and workers. As part of the comprehensive COVID-19 response and recovery programme, FAO and its partners are working to prevent the pandemic from disrupting food systems. While COVID-19 is not transmitted by food products, disruptions precipitated by the primary and secondary effects of the pandemic have put food supplies at risk all over the world, while simultaneously raising awareness on food safety-related issues. Concerted efforts on the food supply chain and more specifically the health and safety of workers, will help the most food insecure countries mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and boost resilience for the long term by facilitating food and agricultural trade, preventing the spreading of any future zoonotic pandemic and helping the transition of the food systems towards sustainability.

FAO in the publication; [Food safety in the time of COVID-19](#) provides sound principles of environmental sanitation, personal hygiene and established food safety practices to reduce the likelihood that harmful pathogens will threaten the safety of the food supply. Additionally, component IV of FAO's COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan is supporting awareness raising and sensitization campaigns among food workers at all levels.

Against this background, the webinar aimed at bringing together an array of diverse partners and experts to discuss issues surrounding occupational health and safety risks along the food supply chain. The discussion focused on food safety guidelines as well as the experiences and learnings from different contexts among the most acutely food insecure countries. Listed below are the main objectives of the virtual event.

- Reflect on the current occupational risks of workers along the food supply chain and the necessary measures to ensure that they are protected as well as to mitigate spread.
- Highlight gaps and occupational health and safety risks/challenges especially in the most acutely food insecure countries.
- Strengthen coordination and collaboration among relevant organizations to assist the flow of information from reliable sources.

Summary points

Occupational safety and health risks in the food supply chain and ILO response in the face of the pandemic

Presented by Halshka Graczyk, ILO

1. Common occupational safety and health risks

The International Labour Organization (ILO) deals with promoting decent work and occupational safety and health in all sectors including the food supply chain. Workers in this sector face several health and safety risks daily. Some of these include risks associated with:

- **Certain occupational chemicals or allergenic agents:** agrochemicals, antibiotics and other veterinary products; certain plants, dusts or materials in protective equipment such as latex gloves.
- **Machinery:** tractors, harvesters, knives, cutting and piercing tools.
- **Animal hazards:** workers risk being physically injured by animals they handle
- **Infections in animals transmissible to humans:** brucellosis, bovine tuberculosis, hydatid disease, tularemia, rabies, Lyme disease, tinea, listeriosis, salmonellosis, campylobacteriosis, erysipeloid, avian and swine influenza, Nipah viral infections, Hepatitis E infections.
- **Contact with wild and poisonous animals:** insects, scorpions, snakes, certain wild mammals.
- **Ergonomic hazards:** use of inadequate equipment and tools, unnatural body position or prolonged static postures, carrying of heavy loads, repetitive work, excessive long hours.
- **Challenging environmental conditions:** Extreme temperatures as well as high humidity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the need to bring mental health in places of work to the forefront of discussions. While not always presented as an immediate risk for the sector, the impact of psycho-social risks such as stress and fatigue can weigh heavily on health outcomes. The ILO has been working to ensure that there is a proper integrated framework for managing psycho-social risks in all working environments. It is important to observe the existing linkages between different health outcomes and the potential for widespread infections in workspaces. For instance, mental stress and fatigue could result in increased accidents and one infected worker can result in a major outbreak.

In addition to illustrating how an unsafe workplace anywhere can lead to many different health impacts on individuals and communities everywhere, the pandemic has introduced several new risks for food supply chain workers. The biggest challenge has been implementing and managing physical distance between workers at work sites that are often too crowded. There is also a lack of appropriate personal protective equipment, especially in food insecure regions (developing countries), while some workers face challenges accessing hygiene facilities and other basic supplies such as water and soap. All these different health risks and challenges could lead to several adverse outcomes, including poisonings, accidents, disease and even death.

2. Responding to occupational safety and health risks

The ILO has developed a number of technical guidelines on COVID-19 response including for workers in informal settings. Key elements include:

- reorganizing workplaces so that appropriate distancing measures are in place;
- ensuring access to clean water and adequate sanitation facilities;
- disinfecting workspaces and equipment;
- ensuring workers are informed on COVID-19 in their language and;
- ensuring access to health checks, medical facilities and paid sick leave.

It is essential to develop and implement comprehensive occupational safety and health (OSH) management systems as well as policies at both national and workplace levels that protect workers. ILO International Labour Standards and OSH management systems use a risk assessment and risk management approach when responding to emerging risks, including those posed by the pandemic. The Hierarchy of Controls should be used to implement preventative measures and it is essential that these measures be continually evaluated to ensure that workplaces stay safe and healthy in the face of the changing world of work and ongoing risks posed by the global pandemic.

Case 1: Awareness raising campaigns for OSH in Mexico

In Mexico, within the framework of a project on the coffee value chain, the ILO is working to improve occupational safety and health and decent working conditions. The project aims at raising awareness amongst workers on safety and health at work in coffee value chains during COVID-19. Audio-visual resources were created as part of a campaign developed by the ILO Vision Zero Fund and the National Federation of Coffee Growers. The campaign included a radionovela with 10 instalments, radio spots and a series of videos. The campaign addressed risks of COVID-19, proper cleaning and disinfection, mitigation measures and other OSH risks.

Case 2: Informal food markets in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, the ILO in partnership with the National Social Security Authority (NSSA) is capacitating informal economy workers with requisite knowledge on occupational health and safety as well as decent work shelters. The project aims at reducing the risk of infection and mitigating the impacts on COVID-19 on the informal economy specifically on informal food markets in Bulawayo, Chinhoyi and Chivhu, while promoting decent work in the targeted locations. The ILO engaged with local partners to have worker-led consultations and hazard identification to create mitigation plans and tackle challenges unique to the specific setting of the workers.

Case 3: Protecting and supporting workers in Coffee sector in Colombia

The National Federation of Coffee Growers and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, jointly with the ILO, developed a protocol for mitigating the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the coffee sector. The protocol provides specific measures and guidance for small farms, as well as tailored information for those working on medium-sized and large farms. The Departmental Committees of Coffee Growers also created a strategy that included “isolation centers” for harvesters who did not have a home or residence in their area of work. The workers have access to the centers when they need to quarantine as well as recover should they present symptoms or tested positive for the virus.

Getting MAD about COVID-19 in Food

Presented by Jeffrey LeJeune, FAO

1. Obstacles to Food Security during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an obstacle in the food supply chain as it ushers interruptions in the delivery of food around the world, causing food insecurity problems. The challenge is even greater in low- and medium-income countries (LMIC). Many of these regions face a triple threat as COVID-19 and its secondary impacts are only exacerbating an already existing food insecurity problem, an important proportion of the populations are largely dependent on agricultural-labour and there is limited access to health care, PPE and vaccines. Agricultural workers are the backbone of food security. Several outbreaks were reported among workers in the food supply chain, and it is very important to prevent outbreaks in places of work to ensure the continuity of food supply chain.

2. Transmission of SARS-CoV-2

COVID-19 is not considered a foodborne pathogen and it is highly unlikely that people can contract COVID-19 from food or food packaging. COVID-19 is a respiratory illness, and the primary transmission route is through person-to-person contact and through direct contact with respiratory droplets generated when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The virus spreads directly from person-to-person when a COVID-19 case coughs or sneezes, producing droplets that reach the nose, mouth, or eyes of another person. Alternatively, as the respiratory droplets are too heavy to be airborne, they land on objects and surfaces surrounding the infected person. It is possible that some will get infected by touching a contaminated surface, object, or the hand of an infected person and then touching their own mouth, nose, or eyes. This may happen, for instance, when touching doorknobs or shaking hands and then touching the face.

3. MAD: Mask, Air Ventilation and Distancing

It is imperative that food workers, including food handlers (i.e., people who directly touch open food, touch food surfaces and other surfaces in rooms where open food is handled), managers, cleaners, maintenance contractors, delivery workers, food inspectors, and visitors all practice good hygiene and take necessary precautions to avoid the spread of COVID-19 in the work environment. The use of facemasks not only decreases the spread of virus from an infected individual, their use also considerably lowers the risk of exposure to contaminated particles in the atmosphere, thereby reducing the probability of infection among others in the same environment. Furthermore, adequate air ventilation is critical for ensuring that workstations have a constant supply of fresh air. Physical distancing remains one of the paramount measures to lower the transmission of COVID-19 among food workers, this includes during commute, during meal breaks, in changing rooms, at security stations and at any other occurrence where there is the potential of people gathering in physical proximity. All three preventative measures should be to be applied to achieve the greatest reduction in transmission risk.

Panel/round table discussion

One Health approach: Simon Doherty, FVE

COVID-19 is not viewed as a threat to the safety of the food supply chain. Rather than contamination of food, the major concerns are about the stability of the food supply chain and workers' health and safety.

Though SARS-CoV-2 is a zoonotic disease i.e., can be passed on from humans to susceptible animals and back to humans, it is largely a human-to-human transmitted disease. The primary transmission is via aerosols and droplets from one infected person to another. Therefore, one way to mitigate a pandemic of this nature is through interventions at a human-animal- environment interface by implementing an integrated One Health (OH) approach.

Early in the pandemic, FVE begun analysing the linkages between abattoirs and food business operators. The research centred on the possible correlations between apparent clusters within the abattoirs and the rapid spread of the virus. It was important to differentiate between apparent links and true cause-and-effect, so that resources could be directed to the areas where they were most effective. For example, there was little to be gained by striving for physical distancing in the workplace, where it was discovered that groups of abattoir workers were living in communal accommodation – it was better to try and focus on keeping those 'bubbles' of workers together in the workplace and separating them from other 'bubbles'.

To implement effective control measures, a better understanding of abattoirs, including the contributions of conditions such as humidity and temperature etc., is critical. The complexity of the situation requires that both animal and human health experts, as well as natural and built environment specialists, social scientists, engineers and other disciplines collaborate to create solutions – the true trans-disciplinary collaboration we associate with One Health.

Perspectives from South Sudan: Wilson Makuwaza, FAO South Sudan

South Sudan, with an asset of livestock estimated at over 36 million, works through a community-based delivery system for animal health services. Since the onset of the pandemic, movement restrictions and lockdowns have resulted in a decline in trade as livestock traders can no longer access remote locations easily.

FAO South Sudan has been working to integrate mitigation actions against COVID-19, including providing PPEs and training on proper use. Other actions, with respect to the food supply chain involve mitigating the spread of infection within slaughterhouses, which is a major challenge especially in the capital city, Juba. In addition to disinfecting workspaces, FAO South Sudan is looking into constructing smaller slaughter facilities across the country to reduce overcrowding.

Pandemics and pathogen outbreaks can unexpectedly occur anywhere in the world. In Africa for instance, some regions have been affected by outbreaks of:

- Ebola, associated with the butchering of primates
- Rift valley fever, particularly common during flooding seasons in remote areas of eastern countries. Early warning systems play a significant role in tackling this challenge
- and the Nipah virus, which was first detected among pig slaughter workers on Malaysian Peninsula

The lessons learned from dealing with the Nipah viruses confirms the importance of a one health approach. Pigs became infected by eating mangoes that were contaminated by bats. Though the COVID-19 pandemic is not considered a significant threat to the safety of food, food hygiene and sanitation as well as feed safety and biosecurity must be maintained. We know that preventing a crisis is better than managing one and the COVID-19 pandemic has made this even clearer. It is a lot cheaper, in terms of both costs and capacity, to invest in risk reduction. Therefore, another reason for upholding food hygiene is to prevent other possible food sanitation related outbreaks that would further burden already strained and fragile health systems in under resourced countries.

**Responding to an ongoing crisis while preparing for the next emergency:
Peter Hoejskov, WHO**

COVID-19 is not only a global health crisis, but an economic and social crisis as well. WHO has been working to improve countries' responses to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis by strengthening the International Health Regulations (IHR) (2005) core capacities required to detect, assess, notify and report events, and respond to public health risks and emergencies of national and international concern. With this, WHO also aims to ensure that countries are better prepared for the next pandemic.

Poor health affects productivity and the volumes of production and the COVID-19 pandemic only attests to this reality. Preventing worker from getting sick not only reduces disruptions in production but also ensures the sustainability of food supply chains. It is for this reason that vaccinations are crucial. Vaccination reduces transmission in the workplace and in the community. This means less disruption to food supply chains and better opportunities for ensuring a sustainable supply of safe and plentiful food.

Action to protecting workers from COVID-19 involves discouraging infected workers to come to work and implementation of appropriate measures to prevent disease transmission in the workplace. This includes the following actions:

- Increase awareness of COVID-19 symptoms and prevention measures among workers.
- Provide regular testing for COVID-19.
- Offer paid sick leave.
- Implementation of public health measures such as physical distance, personal hygiene, air ventilation and use of PPE.
- Provision of appropriate PPE (face masks, handwashing facilities, hand sanitizer etc.) and training on how to use it
- Establish clear procedures on how to report cases of COVID-19.

Keytake away messages

- ✓ **Preventing the spread of infection** in places of work **while sustaining food supply chains** requires action by everyone.
- ✓ It is important to **strengthen collaboration and knowledge sharing and build upon the lessons learned** to inform contingency plans for mitigating emergency outbreaks.
- ✓ Crisis prevention is better than mitigation, thus strengthening **early warning systems**; recognition of the hazard followed by a quick response is imperative.
- ✓ It is critical to apply a **One Health approach** and work in partnership with tripartite constituents, workers organizations, and employers etc. to **establish policies** at both corporate and national levels is critical.

Questions and answers

Questions	Responses
Is there any evidence on the effectiveness of relatively small Perspex screens between workers?	<i>COVID-19 is transmitted from human to human mainly through droplets and aerosols. Physical distancing requirements aim at minimizing this risk. Although there is no data on effectiveness of plastic screens (e.g. Perspex) specifically, this barrier can provide appropriate protection where a physical distancing is not possible, as it will help minimize how far droplets and aerosols spread.</i>
When will we see the revised FAO/WHO guideline? (Ref: COVID-19 and Food Safety: Guidance for food businesses: Interim guidance)	<i>FAO has published revised guidelines for food business operators (Ref: COVID-19 and Food Safety: Guidance for food businesses: Updated guidance):</i> http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb6030en
How should we cope with lack of air ventilation in food processing premises	<i>Where possible, measures should be taken to maximize the air exchange. The wearing of masks and appropriate physical distancing can provide some protection even where additional air circulation is not possible.</i>
Are any guidelines available for control of food delivery and of food and commerce?	<i>Please see the ILO policy brief on this issue:</i> https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/--sector/documents/briefingnote/wcms_741342.pdf <i>Prevention and Control Checklist:</i> https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/--dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_754201.pdf <i>An interesting video as well as on food retailers and the importance of guaranteeing food security to populations whilst ensuring safe and healthy working conditions as well:</i> https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/multimedia/video/institutional-videos/WCMS_744581/lang-en/index.htm

<p>How long does COVID-19 survive on food packaging like plastic?</p>	<p><i>Test results indicated that at very least the genetic material of COVID-19 (though not necessarily the intact infectious virus) can be found on food surfaces and the surface of food packaging.</i></p> <p><i>Under laboratory conditions, it has been shown that the virus can survive some time on surfaces, however, the degree of which depends strongly on the type of material, and environmental conditions. It is important to remember that today's test methods can exhibit exquisite sensitivities and hence may be able to identify traces of the viral genetic material at extremely low level. While the infectious dose is not fully established for COVID-19, it is certain that a single virus is not sufficient to cause an infection. Having said all of that, in no single case has it ever been demonstrated that a person had contracted COVID-19 from food or food packaging. The reported transmission has been directly from human to human.</i></p>
<p>We have seen news from China CDC which indicates live COVID-19 has been detected on the surface of frozen food or the surface of packaged frozen food but are not aware of any scientific publications on this. Any speakers know whether there is solid evidence on the presence of live COVID-19 on the surface of frozen food after shipping from one country to another?</p>	<p><i>FVE statement on Infectious diseases & the role of veterinarians in wider society:</i></p> <p>https://fve.org/publications/infectious-diseases-the-role-of-veterinarians-in-wider-society/</p> <p><i>We are aware of this publication, but the significance of these findings in terms of COVID-19 infection remains not established. COVID-19 on food surfaces or food packaging had not been found to cause COVID-19.</i></p>
	<p>Please, have a look at the recording of COVID-19 & One Health: can we do better? webinar https://fve.org/webinar-covid-19-and-one-health-can-we-do-better/</p> <p>Agree on the need to ensure employers put in measures to assure safe and healthy working environments for workers. When it comes to procedures for COVID-19 testing, isolation, reporting, etc. ILO has technical and ethical guidelines on workers' health surveillance -</p> <p>https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/ilo-bookstore/order-online/books/WCMS_PUBL_9221108287_EN/lang--en/index.htm</p>

	<p>Please, have a look at the recording of COVID-19 & One Health: can we do better? webinar https://fve.org/webinar-covid-19-and-one-health-can-we-do-better/</p> <p>Agree on the need to ensure employers put in measures to assure safe and healthy working environments for workers. When it comes to procedures for COVID-19 testing, isolation, reporting, etc. ILO has technical and ethical guidelines on workers' health surveillance - https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/ilo-bookstore/order-online/books/WCMS_PUBL_9221108287_EN/lang--en/index.htm</p>
<p>Why do some people still get infected by COVID-19 after being vaccinated?</p>	<p>If not all, vaccines have been found to be somewhat effective regarding protection against infection. However, clinical trials have demonstrated that their main benefit lies in protecting people from becoming severely ill. This was determined to be of enough benefit to roll them out. The main benefit today is that medical resources (hospitals, etc.) will remain available to sick people and are not completely overburdened.</p> <p>The need for continual risk assessment for ensuring that new measures do not introduce different occupational risks.</p>
<p>I would like to understand the efficacy of the antigen test since it cheaper and easier to use in under resourced countries?</p>	<p>Some antigen tests are accurate enough to replace RT-PCR when used in people with symptoms. This would be most useful when quick decisions are needed about patient care, or if RT-PCR is not available. Antigen tests may be most useful to identify outbreaks, or to select people with symptoms for further testing with PCR, allowing self-isolation or contact tracing and reducing the burden on laboratory services. People who receive a negative antigen test result may still be infected. https://www.cochrane.org/CD013705/INFECTN_how-accurate-are-rapid-tests-diagnosing-covid-19</p>

Useful resources

- **FAO.** 2017. *Food Safety Risk Management: Evidence-informed policies and decisions, considering multiple factors*. Rome. <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/I8240EN>
- **FAO.** 2020. *Food safety in the time of COVID-19*. Rome. <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca8623en>
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- **ILO.** 2020. *Improving occupational safety and health in the global value chain of coffee in Mexico: Drivers and constraints. Geneva.* <https://vzf.ilo.org/insights/improving-occupational-safety-and-health-in-the-global-value-chain-of-coffee-in-mexico-drivers-and-constraints/>
- **ILO.** 2021. *Impact of COVID-19 in the meat processing sector. ILO brief. Geneva.* [wcms_769864.pdf \(ilo.org\)](https://www.ilo.org/wcms/769864.pdf)
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- **ILO.** 2014. *Ergonomic checkpoints in agriculture: Practical and easy-to-implement solutions for improving safety, health and working conditions. Geneva.* https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/safety-and-health-at-work/resources-library/publications/WCMS_176923/lang--en/index.htm
- **OIE, UNEP & WHO.** 2021. *Reducing public health risks associated with the sale of live wild animals of mammalian species in traditional food markets.* https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/food-safety/ig-121-1-food-safety-and-covid-19-guidance-for-traditional-food-markets-2021-04-12-en.pdf?sfvrsn=921ec66d_1&download=true

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