



B.C. Ministry of Agriculture / Good Agricultural Practices & Food Safety

Frequently Asked Questions

COVID-19 and Good Agricultural Practices and Food Safety Issues

- 1. Food Safety and COVID-19: Do we need to implement extra food safety measures? Handwashing and washing down touched surfaces seem to be the primary message to get rid of this virus. Can our fresh produce and food products make people sick with this coronavirus?**

Answer: Medical professionals and research bodies have not reported that the coronavirus illness is being caused by eating food, but rather a public/human to human health issue. This means eating food is not the way the virus enters the body to cause illness. The virus travels from one worker to another worker due to close working conditions, or by someone picking it up from a surface and then not washing it off prior to touching their face. Food safety practices do not support sick people working with food, so if a farm worker displays illness symptoms, they should remove themselves from the farm operation, seek medical attention, and isolate, so that they do not transmit the virus to other workers.

If you are already implementing strict handwashing (for food safety) then you have some great practices already in place – Thank you for ensuring your handwashing stations are stocked and easy to use! These new COVID-19 guidelines have helped make everyone more aware of the importance of handwashing for both COVID-19 and Food Safety!

The COVID-19 guidelines which include physical distancing are to help you keep your farm workers safe, and the following questions and answers should help you with how to best implement these changes into your good agricultural practices you already have in place.

- 2. On-Farm Food Safety Audits: Will auditors come and carry out on-farm food safety audits? Spring is here, so we know harvest season will soon follow, and for buyers to accept fresh product, they will expect on-farm food safety certification.**

Answer: Please contact your certification body (the third-party who has done your audit in the last year) to find out how they are handling their specific commodity audits. Different commodities are handling these decisions based on their availability of staff and their risk assessments based on past audits. Many have websites with dedicated COVID-19 information, and most On Farm Food Safety (OFFS) Standards have indicated they will honour extensions of past certifications during this time of uncertainty.

Here is a partial listing of OFFS Standards websites with COVID-19 information:

CanadaGAP: <https://www.canadagap.ca/covid-19/>

Global G.A.P. https://www.globalgap.org/uk_en/media-events/news/corona-virus-updates/index.html

Verified Beef Production+: <http://verifiedbeefproductionplus.ca/contact-us.cfm>

Organics (COABC): <https://www.certifiedorganic.bc.ca/>

Chicken/Poultry: <http://bcchicken.ca/growers/covid-19-information-for-growers/>

3. Farm Workers: I have farm workers, where is a good source for information for agricultural workforce issues?

Answer: Both the B.C government and the Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council (CAHRC) have put out information for Canadian agricultural employers and employees; and have other provincial sites for more local answers (e.g. BCCDC, AgSafe, etc.). If your farm houses farm workers, you may need to review and make changes on issues that affect human health, for example, cleaning equipment, soaps and disinfectants, designated cleaning schedules particularly of shared bathrooms, and kitchen meal prep and dish washing.

- [Ministry of Agriculture Covid-19 resource page](#)
- [B.C. Provincial Guidance Document](#)
- [Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council document \(has many provincial links\)](#)

4. Training of Farm Workers: Where can I find good training information? I will be hiring farm workers who will require training on farm practices, particularly safe food handling practices.

Answer: There are many good resources:

- The B.C. Ministry of Agriculture webpage on [Good Agricultural Practices](#), which has translations of those same GAPs in Chinese, Punjabi, and Spanish.
- [AgSafe website](#):
- [Cornell University](#)
- [University of California - Davis](#) (includes amalgamated resources from other Universities):

5. Sanitation Standards of Practice: Are there changes to how food safety practices need to be carried out? COVID-19 as a pandemic creates a certain level of fear that cleaning and disinfecting within the farm operation is not enough for this virus.

Answer: All of the previous food safety practices for farm worker personal hygiene, when working with food products, still need to be carried out as those food safety risks remain. Awareness of their importance and an increase of how often these practices are carried out is how they help with controlling this COVID-19 pandemic.

Physical distancing and understanding cross-contamination between farm workers during food production must now be incorporated in our good agricultural practices. At this point, food is not implicated in the cause of COVID-19 illnesses, however there could be a way for someone to pick up the virus through handling of contaminated product or containers. The new practices must keep you, your workers, and your customers safe so that everyone remains healthy in order to keep the food chain sustainable and that harvesting, and distribution, keeps moving products to the marketplace.

The best practices for this are:

- Follow Provincial Health Officer (PHO) Dr. Bonnie Henry's guidance in the [Protecting BC farmers and farm workers during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) handout for required and best practices.
 - **WASH Hands with soap and water** – this may mean setting up extra temporary hand washing stations. Proper hand washing will destroy the virus and remove all the other food hazards as well.

- Use of gloves is secondary/optional – this requires extra training, when done improperly it can cause extra problems related to food safety such as:
 - Latex gloves introduce an allergen into your food product. Acceptable Nitrile gloves will be in short supply as they are needed in the health care field.
 - Hands must be washed prior to putting on gloves and after taking off gloves, thereby using more time and resources in hand washing.
 - Gloved hands can become contaminated and if the worker sees gloves as ‘protection for them rather than the food’ then the awareness of food safety is not being practiced.
 - Food line workers can easily lose pieces of thin gloves during sorting and packaging, thereby extra caution is needed to not add a physical hazard to the food products.
- **Awareness of ‘Cross-contamination’ situations** will help in recognizing why hand washing and other alternative practices are important to stop transmission of the coronavirus. Safe practices include changing personal behaviors such as the following:
 - What have your hands touched? Your phone needs to be cleaned at a minimum of DAILY as it contaminates your hands and can contaminate your face. Constrain the use of checking your phone to specific times and during breaks from work. Allow extra breaks or longer breaks when workers can access their phones safely and wash hands after using their phone.
 - Do you touch your eyes? Nose? Mouth? That is how the virus enters your body’s upper respiratory tract. Ensure distancing happens between your hands and your face.
 - Do you talk and socialize with other workers while working? Talking as well as coughing and sneezing puts out respiratory droplets into others’ breathing space and on work surfaces. Explore other communication methods like group emails, invest in white boards, does your work place have a loud speaker system?
- **Physical distancing of 6 feet is an important practice.** Use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) at this time is voluntary, though this may change. However, if you cannot adhere to the physical distancing of 6 feet (e.g. transplanting in field, sorting line, harvesting rows) then a mask is a method to contain human aerosol droplets.
 - Training on how to use a mask correctly should be provided. Wrong use of masks can raise the level of a food safety risk to your products. [Mask wearing 101](#): how to put on and take off a mask is a video to help people learn how to do it properly.
 - Brain storm with staff how work might be carried out differently. For example, when workers are doing field work,
 - work on alternate ‘odd numbered’ rows first, and then come back down the field working on the ‘even numbered’ rows. This can work when transplanting, weeding, or harvesting.
 - Work in small teams (PHO recommends no more than 5 workers) so that if one person gets sick there will be less people to isolate and hopefully less COVID-19 transmission.
 - Assign tools and sorting line spaces to teams or individuals; this will contain the contamination to specific areas and equipment should a worker become ill.
- **In summary COVID-19 Good Agricultural Practices for Farm Worker Personal Hygiene:**
 - i. Practice good hand hygiene by washing your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Set up extra temporary hand washing stations to reduce line-ups.
 - ii. Use hand sanitizer containing alcohol from the Health Canada list, if you don’t have access to soap and water. Do not substitute sanitizer for hand washing if potable water is available.
 - iii. Avoid touching your face, mouth, and eyes, and do not use your phone while working.

- iv. Keep a safe distance from others when possible. The PHO recommends at least 6 feet. If this is not possible then masks (used correctly) need to be implemented.
- v. Avoid public places and stay at home when not working to limit bringing outside exposure to the farm operation. Try delegating one specific person to dealing with outside contractors or picking up farm supplies.
- vi. Remember to stock cleaning supplies, even the unusual places including your farm vehicles (e.g. truck, tractor).
- vii. Follow the PHO advice provided in the [Protecting BC farmers and farm workers during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) handout for required and best practices.

6. Tote Cleaning: Are there specific GAPs for Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs)?

Answer: CSAs have some specific GAPs during this time of COVID-19 to be aware of, including how delivery of totes, and cleaning of those totes, be handled when they come back from customers. There are several different ways to manage this; if possible, do not leave the tote with your customers, rather, do the following:

- If a customer comes to the farm gate to pick up their order, designate a spot at the farm gate for pick-up. It is preferred that customers do not interact with you or your workers. If this is not possible, then delegate one person who interacts with the public, as much as possible, at a two metre distance.
- If you choose to deliver, empty the tote's produce into the customer's tote (which they provide, and you do not touch); or
- If available, use paper single-use bags for pick-up or delivery of produce; or
- If a customer must use your tote to take home product, then a strict cleaning and disinfection of the tote must be carried out when the tote is returned. Use the best practice for Sanitation Standard of Practice (SSOP) which includes the following using potable water:
 - 1) Clean with detergent/soap in potable water and friction (this removes all visible dirt and oils);
 - 2) Rinse with potable water to remove all soap;
 - 3) Disinfect with appropriate dilution and submersion time in a disinfectant solution (this removes invisible biological hazards like COVID-19);
 - 4) Air dry (this allows the time for the disinfectant to work).

7. Cleaning Chemicals: Should we be using special soaps, sanitizers and disinfectants?

Answer: Cleaning and disinfecting of equipment and food products is an important part of GAPs and food safety. Potable water with soap and friction are your best way of getting rid of this virus and making sure food contact surfaces are free of this virus.

- Your existing practices are still the best way of getting rid of this virus by first washing with a soap and water solution. The lipid ingredients in soap breaks down the virus envelop (the outer covering) and the friction and water help remove it from the surface (hands and hard surfaces). Disinfection solution application ensures that any hidden virus particles are chemically killed off if the washing missed any virus or other pathogenic microbes.
- Health Canada and the EPA have both put out a list of disinfectants to ensure removal of COVID-19 biological hazards. READ the label as to how to use. **Most disinfectants require time to complete the kill step of all biological hazards.** Lists of acceptable disinfectants can be accessed at:
 - [Health Canada - check the DIN number to see if on the list](#) (this list changes frequently).
 - [EPA List N: Disinfectants for Use Against SARS-CoV-2](#) (no testing yet against COVID-19)

For organic production [please check clause 7 of the Permitted Substance List](#) (PSL) (CAN/CGSB-32.311)

- Check with your certifier for approval of any brand-name products.
- Always read product labels and a Material Safe Data Sheet (MSDS) on correct usage.

8. What do I do if an employee becomes sick from COVID-19?

Answer: This coronavirus is highly contagious and is known to be transmitted prior to a person showing symptoms of the actual illness. When a worker does get sick, and is isolated from work, what do we do regarding their work just prior to going off sick? A few things need to happen, and they should include the following:

- i. Make sure the ill worker gets medical attention and STOP all activities to do a complete risk assessment which means your Mock Recall has become a Voluntary Recall and should be started immediately.
- ii. Identify the workers that were in the team of the sick person and isolate them from the farm and get them tested. Follow the PHO Guidelines on steps that farms must follow to address COVID-19.
- iii. Your record keeping documents and traceability program are key to identify which containers of product and equipment that the sick person handled. These will show if those containers have left the farm and, if so, you need to contact the people who received them so that they can carry out a recall or a detailed cleaning depending on your products and containers.

NOTE: If you have never done a Mock Recall or not sure of what is required to be done during this event, call for help. Do not try to do this on your own. The Ministry of Health and Ministry of Agriculture have staff who can help you through these situations to ensure that your operation gets up and running in as short a time as possible. There are people who can answer your questions and help guide you to ensure nothing is missed, and that it becomes a learning situation.

CONTACTS: Ministry of Agriculture 1-888-221-7141 or AgriServiceBC@gov.bc.ca