

Food Safety and COVID-19

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Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) [is thought](#) to spread mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person sneezes, coughs, or speaks. Currently there is no evidence indicating the transmission of COVID-19 through food, according to U.S. and international public health agencies. However, China—a major U.S. agricultural export market—has reportedly started to institute requirements to address COVID-19-related concerns about the safety of imported food, which could impact global agricultural trade.

Evidence of Food Safety Risk

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [states](#) “there is no evidence to suggest that handling food or consuming food is associated with COVID-19.” The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) [states](#) that the agency is “not aware of any reports at this time of human illnesses that suggest COVID-19 can be transmitted by food or food packaging.” USDA further [indicates](#) there is no evidence to support transmission of COVID-19 associated with food imported to the United States from other countries. While there may be the potential for transmission through contaminated surfaces—for example, if someone with an active infection coughs on packaging later touched by a non-infected person who then touches their eyes, nose, or mouth—the risk of such transmission is low, [according](#) to the CDC. To avoid transfer through contaminated surfaces, it is necessary to follow [good hygiene practices](#).

At food production facilities, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services, [asserts](#) the need to take necessary precautions to protect workers and minimize the disease transmission, including practicing social distancing and disinfecting surfaces, as well as ensuring workers have access to personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks and gloves. While some labeling requirements have been temporarily relaxed to provide regulatory flexibility to food producers related to COVID-19 (for example, certain [food nutrition labeling](#) requirements, [packaging and labeling requirements for shell eggs](#), and [menu labeling requirements](#)), U.S. food safety standards and requirements have otherwise remained in effect. Because of the ongoing crisis, however, some facility inspections have been delayed or rescheduled. For the meat and poultry industries, CDC and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration have [issued guidance](#) outlining steps that meatpacking and meat processing workers and employers should follow to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19.

There is also a consensus among international organizations that COVID-19 transmission is not associated with food and food consumption. The World Health Organization (WHO), an agency of the

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United Nations, [states](#) there is “currently no evidence that people can catch COVID-19 from food or food packaging.” WHO further claims coronaviruses cannot multiply in food but require a live animal or human host to multiply and survive. WHO considers food packaging, preparation, and delivery safe if proper hygiene protocols are followed such as hand washing and sanitization. WHO has issued guidance for [governmental authorities](#) responsible for national food safety control systems to contain widespread food safety risks and to reduce serious disruption to national food safety programs. The guidance also emphasizes the need for PPE to help reduce the spread of disease among workers within the food sector. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations has also issued guidance for additional food safety measures related to COVID-19 for [food businesses](#) and [wholesale food markets](#).

WHO, FAO, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have [acknowledged](#) the role of food safety standards in promoting fair practices in food trade. They have [called](#) on national governments to minimize the impact of COVID-19-related border restrictions on food trade to ensure food safety and food security.

Potential Trade Implications

Despite lack of evidence that COVID-19 is transmitted through food, concerns that restrictions related to COVID-19 are affecting trade have been [reported](#) by U.S. agricultural producers regarding shipments to certain countries. Specifically, in China, there have been [reports of COVID-related product testing](#) for meat, seafood, fresh fruit, and bulk grains. According to [U.S. fruit and vegetable exporters](#), China has also instituted administrative measures requiring registration of foreign manufacturers and a Letter of Commitment from foreign suppliers certifying that food shipments are not contaminated with coronavirus. Such additional regulatory requirements have the potential to impact global trade and could reduce or block U.S. food and agricultural exports.

In response, USDA and FDA issued a [joint statement](#) claiming the United States is “taking every necessary precaution to prioritize food safety especially during these challenging times” and reiterating that there is “no evidence that people can contract COVID-19 from food or from food packaging.” The European Union has also [stated](#) “there has been no report of transmission of COVID-19 via consumption of food to date,” which is further supported by the [findings](#) of its European Food Safety Authority.

Both the [United States](#) and the [European Union](#) have issued statements to the WTO’s Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures arguing that these types of border restrictions are not based on risk. Under WTO rules, global food safety regulations and standards are to operate within the framework of internationally accepted trade rules and norms, including safety and public health protections addressed in the multilateral [Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures](#) (SPS Agreement) and the [Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade](#). Under the SPS Agreement, for example, countries may adopt and enforce public health and safety measures “necessary to protect human, animal or plant life or health,” so long as such measures are not applied in an arbitrary or discriminatory manner. Yet trade restrictions citing food safety concerns are often implemented through various SPS measures and other technical regulations such as testing, registration, certification, and labeling requirements.

Congress may examine the extent to which U.S. food and agricultural exports might be affected by such trade restrictions as the United States and its trading partners continue to grapple with the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

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