

THE SAFETY OF REUSE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



ANSWERS TO THE 7 MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS REGARDING THE SAFETY OF REUSABLE PRODUCTS



CAN COVID-19 SPREAD THROUGH CONTACT WITH SURFACES OF PRODUCTS?

Short answer: Available evidence indicates that the virus spreads primarily from inhaling aerosolized droplets, rather than through contact with surfaces.

According to the [US Centers for Disease Control and Preventions \(CDC\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html), “The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person...between people who are in close contact with one another, through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks.”

In addition, “It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes.”¹

But the [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cleaning-disinfection.html) also states that **transmission of the virus from surface contact has never been documented.**²

The CDC recommends cleaning and disinfecting surfaces as precautionary measures and recommends hand washing as the most important prevention measure for surface contact transmission.³



IF THE VIRUS CAN TRANSFER FROM SURFACES - ARE DISPOSABLE PRODUCTS SAFER THAN REUSABLE ONES?

Short answer: No. Even though odds of getting the virus from surfaces are extremely low, based on how long the virus lasts on surfaces and typical consumer and worker behavior - disposable products are not safer than reusable ones.

In one study, the virus was shown to be infectious for up to 24 hours on paper and cardboard and between 2-3 days on plastic and stainless steel.⁴ In another study, the virus was not found to be infectious on print or tissue paper, whereas it was infectious up to 1 day on cloth, up to 4 days on glass, and up to 7 days on plastic and stainless steel.⁵ COVID-19 can be found on both disposable and reusable materials, and plastic is one of the materials on which it survives longest.

In theory, any object brought into a public space either by customers or workers could have the virus on it. Customer’s purses, wallets, credit cards and clothing also touch surfaces. However, they are not temporarily restricted like reusable bags in some places. This points to the inconsistencies, and also lack of rationale and science, which are driving these restrictions.

If you or your customers are still worried about surface transmission of COVID-19 (even though the latest research confirms there’s no evidence of this happening), let hygiene and sanitation guide your choices. The virus can last the longest (up to 7 days) on plastic. Single-use products like plastic cups, plastic-wrapped utensils, or plastic bags are handled by several retail workers before reaching the customer. Whereas, reusable products provided by a retailer, like cups, utensils, and to-go containers, must be adequately cleaned and sanitized according to food safety regulations.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html> - Retrieved May 1, 2020

² <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cleaning-disinfection.html> - Retrieved May 1, 2020

³ *ibid.*

⁴ <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2004973> - Retrieved May 1, 2020

⁵ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247\(20\)30003-3/fulltext#coronavirus-linkback-header](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247(20)30003-3/fulltext#coronavirus-linkback-header) - Retrieved May 15, 2020



WHAT DO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT GUIDELINES SAY ABOUT RETAIL FOOD SAFETY AND REUSABLE FOODWARE AND PRODUCTS USED BY CONSUMERS AND BUSINESSES?

Short answer: *In the CDC and FDA guidances, reusable products are not considered problematic or a cause for concern. Social distancing and hygiene are the primary protections for workers and consumers in retail food settings.*

To protect workers and customers in restaurants and bars, [current recommendations from CDC defers to the FDA](#).¹ The [FDA Guidance](#) on Best Practices for Retail Food Stores, Restaurants, and Food Delivery Services during the COVID-19 Pandemic focuses on social distancing, foodware washing and sanitizing, cleaning and sanitizing, and personal protective equipment (PPE) for workers.² **No mention is made of any threats posed by reusable bags, cups, or cutlery or other reusable products.**³

The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) states: “The CDC, FDA and CDPH are not aware of any reports at this time that suggest COVID-19 can be transmitted by food or food packaging.”⁴



WHAT DOES THE FOOD INDUSTRY SAY ABOUT RETAIL SAFETY AND REUSABLE FOODWARE?

Short answer: *The National Restaurant Association’s Guide to Reopening re: COVID-19 adheres to FDA guidance, focusing on cleaning, disinfecting, and social distancing.*

They don’t promote single-use products. The only mention of reusable products is a suggestion to clean reusable menus.⁵



ARE REUSABLE PRODUCTS AND SERVICES REGULATED?

Short answer: *Reusable products used in food service must meet strict safety requirements.*

Restaurants and retail food service are among the most highly regulated businesses in terms of public health.⁶ Existing state food safety codes are based on FDA Guidance to States. **State food safety codes require extensive ware washing and sanitizing at high heat that meets the level of hygiene and disinfection required by the FDA and CDC.**

Tom Szaky, CEO of Terracycle/Loop cites their reusable container washing system, “We are protecting for other pathogens and concerns that are way more potent than Covid.”⁷

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html>

² <https://www.fda.gov/food/food-safety-during-emergencies/best-practices-retail-food-stores-restaurants-and-food-pick-up-delivery-services-during-covid-19#operations>.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/COVID-19/RetailFoodBeverageandOtherRelatedServiceVenues.aspx>

⁵ <https://restaurant.org/Downloads/PDFs/business/COVID19-Reopen-Guidance.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.fda.gov/food/retail-food-protection/fda-food-code>

⁷ Tom Szaky - statements made during April 30, 2020 webinar - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKGDRAWlxPw&feature=youtu.be>



HOW CAN WORKERS BE PROTECTED WHEN CUSTOMERS BRING REUSABLES INTO RETAIL?

Short answer: Even though this should not be a concern (according to health experts), if a customer brings reusable products into a retail space, contact-free practices could protect workers.

Systems in which there is no contact between the customer's reusable cup, container, or bag and retail surface areas could, in theory, protect workers, and are consistent with the abundance of caution approach to addressing COVID-19 transmission.

For example, in states like California that have plastic bag ban laws, customers are accustomed to bringing their own reusable bags. [California's Occupational Safety and Health Administration \(CalOSHA\)'s guidance for infection prevention in grocery stores](#) recommends, "When customers bring their own bags, employees should be instructed:

- Not to touch or place groceries in customer brought bags.
- Ask customers to leave their own bags in the shopping cart.
- Ask customers to bag their own groceries."



ARE BRING-YOUR-OWN (BYO) REUSABLE PRODUCTS THE MAIN WAY TO REDUCE WASTE AND PLASTIC POLLUTION IN RETAIL FOOD SERVICE?

Short Answer: While BYO is great, what's even better is when businesses have reuse systems which serve customers in ways that don't generate waste. When cafes and restaurants provide reusable cups and containers for take-out, customers don't have to remember to BYO.

Any product designed to be used for a matter of minutes and then thrown away is not a sustainable or safe option, regardless of whether it's made from plastic, paper, metal or plants. The real culprit isn't just single-use plastics - it's "single-use" itself.

But the good news is, that all over the world, businesses are creating reusable cup, container, and packaging services so that customers don't have to remember to BYO. It's just the way they're accustomed to getting their coffee, takeout, or groceries.

Reducing disposables coupled with innovative reuse systems is not only the right thing to do for the planet - it also saves businesses money, creates local jobs, **protects health and reduces plastic pollution at the same time.**

TO GET MORE HELPFUL RESOURCES AND SUPPORT DURING COVID-19, VISIT OUR DEDICATED WEBPAGE, [REUSE RESOURCES FOR THIS MOMENT](#), EMAIL US AT INFO@UPSTREAMSOLUTIONS.ORG AND [SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTER](#) TO STAY UPDATED ON UPSTREAM NEWS AND EVENTS!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES on Food Safety, Dining out and Grocery Shopping are available from the [North Carolina State University Extension Safe Plates](#) program.

[Food Safety, Dining Out and Grocery Shopping Is COVID-19 a Food Safety Issue?](#) (3.17.20)

[Is Coronavirus a Concern with Takeout?](#) (3.23.20)

[Is Coronavirus a Concern at the Grocery Store?](#) (4.16.20)

[Cleaning and Disinfecting Reusable Bags](#) (3.26.20)

[Shopping and Handling Groceries](#) (4.16.20)

