

HYGIENE AND SAFETY GUIDELINE FOR FOOD HANDLERS AND FOOD BUSINESS OPERATORS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC



BHUTAN AGRICULTURE AND FOOD REGULATORY AUTHORITY (BAFRA)

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1. Introduction

1.1 Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by SARS-COV-2 virus is the latest global threat. Its clinical and epidemiological characteristics are still being studied. The disease is spreading rapidly and the number of cases is rising in most of the countries including Bhutan. The disease can manifest as mild flu like symptoms and in some cases even as gastrointestinal symptoms. The respiratory diseases in severe form can manifest as acute respiratory illness and pneumonia.

As evident, COVID-19 seems to spread:

- Directly as human to human transmission, through the droplets of the infected person by sneezing or coughing; through close personal contact with infected person (including touching and shaking hands); or through touching nose, mouth or eyes with contaminated hands.
- Indirectly through touching contaminated surfaces.

1.2 The potential for food borne transmission is a concern with every new emerging infection. However, there are no reports or any evidence of faeco-oral transmission of Coronavirus and no reported case of the disease has been linked to transmission through food. In case of COVID-19, the main risk involved is human to human transmission during food handling, from close contact with food handler or customer.

1.3 Current evidence on other Coronavirus strains show that while Coronavirus appear to be stable at low and freezing temperatures on food surfaces for a certain period, food hygiene and good food safety practices can prevent their transmission through food. The best practice for food business operators and consumers is to maintain highest standards of personal hygiene, following the standard protocol of social distancing and limiting social contact, and detecting and isolating the infected persons. WHO has advised social distancing and maintaining high personal hygiene standards as a means of containing and stopping transmission of this virus.

1.4 It is mandatory for all the food businesses to implement Criteria for Good Hygienic and Manufacturing Practices developed by BAFRA for Licensing of Food Business (downloadable from BAFRA website: <http://www.bafra.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/BAFRA-GHP-GMP-Criteria- March 2014.pdf>) to ensure food safety and hygiene in food establishments. Under the present circumstances of COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent requirement for food business to ensure compliance with measures to protect food handlers from contracting COVID19, to prevent exposure to or transmission of the virus, and to strengthen the food hygiene and sanitation practices.

1.5 This document provides guidance to food businesses, including their personnel involved in handling of food and other employees to prevent spread of COVID-19 in the work

environment and any incidental contamination of food/food packages. It should be followed in conjunction with health advisories issued by Ministry of Health.

2. Responsibility of Food Business Operator/Manager

In general, food businesses should follow the latest guidelines and SOP issued by Ministry of Health on preventive measures to contain spread of COVID-19.

Specifically, Food business owner/ Manager shall ensure that:

2.1 Food handlers/workers are made aware about COVID19 symptoms so that they are able to recognize the symptoms early and seek appropriate medical care and testing, and thereby minimize the risk of infecting fellow workers. They should be provided with training on risk factors, safe food handling, social distancing and other protective behaviours (e.g., cough etiquette and wearing of face masks/face covers, hand washing with soap or using of alcohol based hand rubs) required amid COVID-19 infections.

2.2 Employers should not allow employees to enter food establishments if they have flu like symptoms.

Some common symptoms of COVID-19 include:

- Fever (temperature > 37°C)
- Cough - Shortness of breath
- Breathing difficulties
- Fatigue

2.3 Entrance of food establishment should have mandatory hand washing facilities &/or hand sanitizer for employees/ customers/visitors.

2.4 Employees/food handlers/visitors should be encouraged to self-declare and inform about any signs/symptoms of respiratory illness before they visit the premises, or while working there. In some cases, infected people may be asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic and may not display any signs or symptoms of disease or may have mild symptoms that can be easily overlooked. The employers, therefore, should ensure the availability of masks and protective gear to all food handlers. In case a food handler is suspected to have COVID-19 infection, the matter should be reported to Ministry of Health immediately.

2.5 Regular monitoring of the employees/ food handlers is essential for prevention of COVID-19 spread within the food establishment. The employees/ food handlers should also self-monitor and report any symptoms to the employers. Wearing masks/face covers and protective gears at all times should be ensured. The employer must provide protective gears to employees at all times. The employee should maintain at least two meters of distance from each other and practice social distancing in the workplace.

2.6 Posters/standees/audio visuals on preventive measures for COVID-19 should be displayed in the food establishments for awareness of employees/visitors/customers.

2.7 An in-house emergency response team should be established in large food businesses to effectively deal with suspected COVID-19 infections and one person should be designated as the COVID-19 focal person. The emergency response team and the COVID-19 focal point contact details should be shared with all employees. The team should have detailed protocols on the steps to be taken when handling suspected/positive COVID-19 cases.

Further, as a means of general preparedness, the following should be ensured:

- List of emergency contact numbers of hospitals for COVID-19 testing and treatment is maintained;
- Adequate disinfectant for emergency use are available;
- Basic personal protective gears viz. face masks, gloves and hand sanitizers are procured and stored as per government advisories, from time to time;
- A process for record keeping is established wherein all the related information - attendance, health status of employees, visitor details are maintained.

3. Personal Hygiene of Food Handlers

3.1 Food business shall ensure that their hygiene standards are in line with established food safety requirements and these practices include:

- Proper hand hygiene – washing with soap and water for at least 20 Seconds.
- Frequent use of alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Good respiratory hygiene (cover mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing and wash hands)
- Frequent cleaning/disinfection of work surfaces and touch points such as door knobs/handles, electric switches etc.
- Avoiding close contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing.

3.2 Proper hand hygiene protocols should be strictly followed. Employee/ food handlers shall thoroughly wash and sanitize hands and change into clean uniform before entering the food premise. Hands should be washed for at least 20 seconds using water (preferably warm water) and soap. Hands should be dried with clean towel. Water tap should be sanitized after each use.

Hands shall be washed:

- before starting work
- after coughing, sneezing or blowing nose
- before/after touching face or hair
- before handling cooked or ready-to-eat food

- after handling or preparing raw food
- after handling waste
- after cleaning duties
- after using the toilet
- after eating and drinking
- after handling money or paper (such as bill, indent, forms, etc.)
- after touching surfaces such as door knobs, walls, windows, doors, keyboards, electric switches, steering wheel, etc.
- after removal of personal protective equipment such as gloves, face covers, etc.

3.3 If soap and running water are not immediately available, provide alcohol based hand rubs containing 70% alcohol.

3.4 Spitting should be prohibited in all areas.

3.5 Employees/food handlers shall wear face masks and clean protective clothing like /aprons, head gears, gloves at all the time while in the production area. The face mask should fit perfectly on face without leaving any gaps on mouth, nose and chin. The face masks should be changed every six hours or as soon as they get wet. Reusable face masks shall be washed with soap, dried and sanitized thoroughly. In case disposable face masks are used or reusable face mask is damaged, it shall be disposed of in a closed bin. While removing face mask, care should be taken not to touch outer surface of the face mask. Employees shall avoid touching their face, eyes, nose, etc. after removal of face mask before washing their hands. Staff should wash hands after removing their regular clothes and before touching their clean uniforms to avoid contamination of clean clothes.

3.6 Employees should not wear personal jewellery, watches etc. while at work. Playing with mobile phone should be discouraged while at work place.

3.7 Gloves shall be worn while handling prepared food or ready to eat food. During this time no other surface, equipment, utensils should be touched or no non-food related activities such as emptying bin, closing doors/windows, touching mobile phones, handling currency etc. should be carried out. Otherwise, the gloves shall be changed and suitably disposed of. Hands must be washed between gloves change and when they are removed. Hand washing is a greater protective barrier to infection than wearing disposable gloves and wearing gloves shall not be considered as a substitute for hand washing. Wearing gloves may give a false sense of security and may result in staff not washing hands as frequently as required. Gloves worn for a prolonged period usually leads to sweating and bacterial growth on hands. Therefore, gloves shall be changed frequently and hand should be washed between gloves change. Employees shall be trained on the correct method of using and disposing gloves.

3.8 Respiratory hygiene is important to prevent COVID-19 spread at a workplace. Employees shall cover their mouth and nose with tissue or bent elbow while coughing or sneezing. The

tissue shall be disposed in a closed bin and hands shall be thoroughly washed and sanitized, before handling food again.

3.9 Using each other's phones, belongings, sharing of common stationery like pens, or other work tools and equipment, should be discouraged.

3.10 Used masks and gloves should be disposed in closed separate waste bin. Instructions should be displayed for correct technique for removal. The waste bin dedicated for disposal of used mask and gloves should be clearly marked. Employees shall be instructed to wash hands with soap and water or sanitize hands using 70% alcohol based sanitizer for at least 20 seconds after disposal of the mask and gloves.

4. Practice Social Distancing

4.1 Social distancing aims, through a variety of means, to minimize physical contact between individuals and thereby to reduce the possibility of person to person transmission of the disease. A minimum distance of two meters shall be maintained between two persons at all points in a food establishment.

4.2 To implement social distancing, food businesses shall:

- limit the number of people on a production floor or a kitchen or a shop by creating physical barriers so that people in smaller spaces also get protected without hindering work, wherever possible.
- use spacing measures (e.g. floor markers, stickers) at queues, workstations/food preparation areas, seating areas to ensure two meters gap between food handlers.
- modify if feasible, workstations along the processing line so that workers are separated at least by two meters in all directions. Ideally modification should be such that workers do not face one another.
- use physical barriers, such as strip curtains, plexi glass or similar material or other impermeable dividers or partitions in the processing lines.
- review the shift arrangement and social interaction of the staff. Increase time in between shifts to minimize staff interaction. This will also help in ensuring more time for cleaning and sanitation.
- prohibit sharing of lockers by employees and ensure a gap of two meters is maintained by employees while using the lockers.
- In case of food deliveries, prefer leaving food packets outside the door or maintain a gap of two meters from the customer.
- encourage takeaways and food deliveries instead of dine-in options.
- If possible, arrange separate entry and exit points for employees /visitors/customers.

- Face-to-face meetings should be restricted as much as possible. The management should identify roles or areas within a business which may be managed through work from home or by remotely working away from other staff.
- Avoid crowding of staff in parking areas or any other common utility areas.

5. Cleaning and Sanitation of Premises

5.1 Food premise shall be always well maintained and cleaned thoroughly and sanitized daily.

5.2 Various areas of food establishment (such as food preparation/ production area, stores, packaging area, service area, waste disposal area, etc.), office space, transport vehicle shall be regularly cleaned and disinfected using appropriate disinfectant solution.

5.3 Equipment, containers, utensils, cutlery, etc. should be cleaned thoroughly with detergent and water. It is preferred to use hot water (above 60° C) for washing and sanitizing.

5.4 High touch points (such as handrails of staircase, public counters, intercom systems, equipment like telephone, printers/scanners, and other office machines, table tops, chair handles, pens, diary files, keyboards, mouse, mouse pad, tea/coffee dispensing machines, etc.) shall be cleaned and disinfected at least twice daily. In case of metallic surfaces like door handles, handles of baskets/carts, display racks where use of bleach is not suitable, 70 percent alcohol shall be used to wipe the surfaces. Hand sanitizing stations should be installed in food establishments (especially at the entry) and near high contact surfaces.

5.5 Toilets and washrooms shall be cleaned after every shift using water and detergent followed by disinfection.

5.6 All cleaning equipment, cloth, mops, reusable protective gear such as boots, gloves etc. shall be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected after every use and prior to use in other areas.

6. Specific Instructions for different food sectors

6.1 Food Service/Delivery/Takeaways

- Food service area shall be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected after every meal prepared. Surfaces repeatedly touched by employees or customers such as door knobs, equipment handles, check-out counters, and grocery cart handles, etc. shall be disinfected frequently.
- Hand wash facility should be made available to the workers and if that is not possible hand sanitizers should be placed at the entry of the service area/ billing counter and used accordingly.

- It is preferred to order raw material, packaging material, etc. in advance (at least 48-72 hrs). This will provide time to keep products in isolation and avoid possibility of COVID19 contamination from surface of the food packets.
- Even with proper hand washing, food workers should use a barrier such as tongs, gloves, or other utensil to prevent direct hand contact with food.
- Ready-to-eat food item shall be kept covered. Use gloves to avoid direct contact of bare hands with ready-to-eat foods.
- There should be visible notices pasted, for staff promoting hand hygiene and physical distancing.
- Employees shall wear clean uniform, face mask, gloves and head covers at all times. Individuals showing COVID-19 symptoms should be sent to the health facility for further evaluation and encouraged to stay home.
- Fruits and vegetables shall be washed in potable running water before storage. All food items meant to be consumed raw shall be thoroughly washed in potable running water before consumption.
- Help customers to maintain social distancing by way of encouraging spacing between the customers while in line for service or check out, in accordance with the established social distancing norm (minimum two meters gap). Establish designated pick-up zones for customers to help social distancing. Waiting area should have designated circles or stickers for ensuring social distancing while waiting.
- Customers shall be encouraged to place orders online or via telephone, well in advance. This will help in reducing the wait time at the food establishment.
- Buffet system food service and mass gathering shall be avoided during COVID-19 pandemic.

In case of dine-in food services;

- Dedicated food handler(s) should serve food items to customers instead of multiple customers on their own using serving spoons.
- Minimum two meters gap is maintained between the food handler and customer.
- Minimum two meters gap is maintained between the seating space and tables in the service area.
- Not more than 50 per cent of the seating capacity is occupied at any given time.

- High touch points such as countertops, tongs, ladles, handles, etc. should be cleaned and disinfected frequently.

In case of food delivery, food handler shall ensure that:

- Face is covered with a clean mask; hands are sanitized before food pick up and after delivery. Delivery personnel should carry sanitizer at all times.
- If gloves are worn by delivery personnel, they are removed and disposed properly after delivery and hand shall be thoroughly washed with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or sanitized with 70 per cent alcohol.
- Social distancing is followed by maintaining a minimum two meters gap between self and customer.
- Contact with common touch points such as door bell, handles, etc. should be avoided. If unavoidable, hands are to be sanitized after coming in contact with common touch points.
- Food delivery bag should be disinfected after each delivery cycle.
- Employees shall refrain from handling cash. In case cash is handled, employees shall wash their hands afterwards. Customers shall be encouraged to use contactless modes of payments such as mBOB, e-Teru, mPay etc. In case credit/debit cards are used, the card machine shall be sanitized with 70 % alcohol after each use.
- Menu card, utensils, cutlery, bottles or salt shakers should be cleaned and disinfected, after each use.

6.2 Food Retail

- 6.2.1 All employees shall wear clean clothes/uniforms, headgear; face masks and gloves at all times.
- 6.2.2 Food business shall regulate the number of customers entering retail stores at any point of time and avoid overcrowding. Hand washing facilities or Hand sanitizer should be provided at the points of entry and exit of a premise to all.
- 6.2.3 Social distancing should be followed by staff and customers. Floor markings, stickers, etc. should be used to maintain the required gap between customers, while they wait for their turn to enter the shop or for billing. Make regular announcements to remind customers about social distancing.

- 6.2.4 Common touch points such as door handles/knobs, racks, billing counters, etc. should be cleaned and sanitized frequently. Handles of baskets/trolleys should be sanitized after every use.
- 6.2.5 In case of food delivery, food handler shall ensure that;
- Face is covered with a clean mask and hands sanitized before food pick up and after delivery. Sanitizer should be carried by delivery personnel at all times.
 - If disposable gloves are worn, then gloves shall be removed after delivery and before entering the food premise. Hands shall be sanitized before entering the premise.
 - Social distancing is followed by maintaining a minimum two meters gap between self and customer.
 - Contact with common touch points such as door bell, handles, etc. should be avoided (example – keep the doors open so that it is not touched). If unavoidable, hands should be sanitized after coming in contact with common touch points.
 - Employees shall refrain from handling cash. In case cash is handled, employees shall wash their hands afterwards. Customers shall be encouraged to use contactless modes of payments such mBoB, e-Teeru, mPay etc. In case credit/debit cards are used, the card machine shall be sanitized with 70 percent alcohol after each use.

6.3 Food Transportation or distribution

- 6.3.1 Drivers, loaders and other support staff shall be made aware about COVID-19 infection symptoms and its prevention by following high standards of hygiene, cleaning and sanitation and following social distancing.
- 6.3.2 Delivery/transport vehicles shall be cleaned and sanitized (and if possible, disinfected) regularly. Such vehicles should only be used for food deliveries/distribution.
- 6.3.3 Drivers, loaders and other support staff displaying flu like or COVID-19 symptoms shall refrain from handling/transporting/delivering food.
- 6.3.4 Drivers, loaders and other support staff shall maintain high standards of personal hygiene. They shall be provided with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, which may be fixed in the driver's cabin. Face covers shall be worn at all times.
- 6.3.5 Drivers and other staff delivering food or raw-materials to food premises should not leave their vehicles during delivery (if possible), and shall refrain from stopping in between for tea breaks, etc. to minimize contact with other people.

- 6.3.6 If a vehicle enters an area marked as a COVID-19 hotspot for deliveries/ pickups, then the vehicle shall be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected before use.

7. Food Packaging

- 7.1 Corona virus is known to survive on surfaces of various materials for some duration. Recent INFOSAN research report that the virus can remain viable for up to 72 hours on plastic and stainless steel, up to 4 hours on copper, and up to 24 hours on cardboard. *(This research was conducted under laboratory conditions with controlled relative humidity and temperature and should be interpreted with caution in the real-life environment.)* Food businesses shall ensure that food handlers involved in food packaging should maintain a high level of personal hygiene, and social distancing. All measures shall be adopted to ensure that food packaging is kept clean and away from sources of contamination.

8. Guideline for Customers

- 8.1 Food businesses should ensure that customers are informed about the steps to be followed by them within food business premises to prevent spread of COVID-19 disease.
- 8.2 Customers showing flu like or COVID-19 symptoms should avoid visiting food businesses.
- 8.3 Consumers must follow the usual precautions of wearing mask while going out for buying any food, ordering food or taking deliveries. Frequent use of hand sanitizer is recommended.
- 8.4 All customers should maintain social distancing while waiting in queues, placing orders, paying bills. Minimum distance of two meters should be maintained at all times. Sharing of food and drinks is discouraged.
- 8.5 Customers shall be advised to only touch the products that they intend to purchase. Contact/ touching of other food products, area and surface should be avoided.
- 8.6 Where possible, packaging materials of the deliveries should be sanitized using 70% alcohol based sanitizer before opening the package. After taking the deliveries, customers should thoroughly wash their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds &/or sanitize the hands properly for at least 20 seconds using 70% alcohol based sanitizer. Sanitizer should not be used as a substitute for hand washing where hand washing with soap is feasible.

9. Guidelines for management of food establishment on detection of COVID-19 positive case

- 9.1 Food production facilities, distributors, wholesalers and retailers are a part of our nation's "critical infrastructure" and must remain operational as far as reasonably possible to feed the country. Inconsistent approaches while reacting to an incident of an individual, particularly

manufacturing personnel, testing positive for COVID-19, have the potential to jeopardize our food system. Therefore, the food business should have in place a detailed emergency plan for handling the COVID-19 suspect/positive case at the premise. In case of a confirmed positive COVID-19 case at the premises of the Food Establishments, the Food Business shall temporarily shut down until the activities related to isolation; decontamination, cleaning and sanitization etc are conducted in line with the advisories from MoH. The Food Business may reopen on the recommendations or clearance from the MoH.

9.2 The key recommendations for in-house emergency response team while dealing with employees in light of the COVID-19 pandemic include:

- In case any employee has symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 (i.e., fever, cough, and/or shortness of breath) at the facility, he/she shall be immediately isolated in a designated isolation area. Immediate medical advice should be sought from the nearest designated medical facility (hospital/clinic) and their directions followed.
- The in-house emergency response team shall identify and isolate, and advised home quarantine all employees/food handlers who came into close contact (within one meter) with the COVID-19 suspect/positive case.
- Reporting of illness: If a food handler develops any symptom of COVID-19 infection (dry cough, trouble in breathing, high fever and chills) while at home, he/she should not report to work but inform the employer and the nearest health facility on phone or email.

10. Guideline for cleaning and disinfection of premise accessed by COVID-19 positive person

10.1 In a situation where a COVID-19 positive case is detected in a facility during working, it is recommended to immediately perform cleaning and disinfection of all surfaces likely to be accessed by the said worker. All the areas/sections, machines, equipment, etc. accessed by the COVID-19 positive employee shall be identified and immediately closed for others. This area should be opened next day or later, only after cleaning and disinfection process has been completed.

10.2 The exposed area/section, toilet, workstation, counters, lockers and equipment that came in contact with the infected person should be thoroughly cleaned with water and detergent and disinfected with appropriate disinfectant.

10.3 The areas where COVID-19 positive employee was known or is likely to have visited shall be disinfected. However, it is advised to demarcate all zones or areas which have had or likely to have an exposure to the COVID-19 suspect/positive case. Areas confirmed not to have been exposed to COVID19 may remain operational. However, in no circumstance, area or

equipment accessed by the COVID19 case should be kept operation without completing the cleaning and disinfection process.

- 10.4 All the waste that has been in contact with the COVID-19 infected patient such as used PPE, tissues, papers etc. shall be collected in separate bags and handed over to authorised waste collectors engaged by local authorities for safe disposal.
- 10.5 Food business should also comply with any guidelines or recommendations issued by the Ministry of Health in this regard.
- 10.6 The above protocol is to be followed on detection of COVID-19 a positive case. The same is advised to be followed in case of any suspect case where the symptoms and history indicate COVID-19 infection.

11. Guideline for managing of Food Handled by COVID-19 suspect or positive employee

There is currently no evidence to support that the SARS-COV-2 virus can be transmitted to humans through food or food packaging materials. However, this virus can survive on different surfaces for up to 72 hours.

The following guidelines for treatment of foods handled by a COVID-19 positive food employee shall be implemented:

- Raw/cooked food preparation with shelf life less than 72 hours or intended for immediate consumption shall be discarded.
- Packaged food with shelf life more than 72 hours and not intended for immediate consumption should be stored separately for at least 72 hours

Note: This guidance document is an interim guideline that is based on the current available information on COVID-19 and food safety and may be revised as and when any new information on COVID-19 pandemic emerges.

12. REFERENCES

- BAFRA GHP/GMP Criteria For Licensing Of Food Business
- <https://fssai.gov.in/cms/coronavirus.php>
- <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/covid-19-and-food-safety-guidance-for-food-businesses>