

Personal Hygiene and Protective Equipment (PPE): Guidance on reducing the risk of communicable disease transmission in food processing facilities

Guidance updated: May 20, 2022

Formatting updated: July 30, 2024

Definitions of key terms:

Food processing facility: In this guidance, food processing facilities include all food premises where food is packaged, distributed, transported, and/or processed. Food processing activities include washing, rinsing, cooking, smoking, salting, canning, freezing, pasteurizing, reprocessing, and packing, as well as shipping of food at distribution centres, slaughter facilities, and food manufacturing sites (for example, bakeries).¹

Worker: In this guidance, a food worker includes anyone who physically visits or is present at any time inside the food processing facility. This includes owners, operators, managers, supervisors, food handlers, cleaners, maintenance contractors, delivery workers, enforcement officials and anyone else who may be present where food is processed, packaged or handled.

Employers and owners/operators of food processing facilities must protect themselves and their workers from acquiring communicable diseases such as COVID-19 on the job. This document provides guidance on limiting the spread of illnesses at the workplace. Facilities should create and maintain a culture of workplace safety that embraces personal responsibility for wellness at the workplace supported by management and workers alike. Facilities can foster a culture of safety by including expectations for staff health and wellness in a communicable disease prevention plan. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the importance of infection control and prevention measures to mitigate and prevent communicable diseases, keep workers healthy and food processing facilities operating. Food processing facilities in B.C. already have communicable disease prevention plans, policies and practices in place with COVID-19 safety plans that should contain written procedures to support activities that demonstrate compliance with procedures, visitor log records, worker health checks, and training records. Employers and owners/operators are required to provide information when requested by WorkSafeBC and other enforcement officials. WorkSafe BC has identified five elements of a successful communicable disease prevention plan: ventilation; hand hygiene; vaccine promotion; cleaning and sanitation; as well as worker illness policies. Please see this guidance for further details.²

This factsheet reviews personal hygiene and PPE measures.

Key principles to prevent spread of communicable diseases

There are three key principles to prevent illness at the workplace, including food processing facilities:

1. Building structures (referred to as the built environment) and reduction of communicable disease transmission risk.
 - This section covers ventilation, cleanliness, and sanitation at the work site, reducing crowding between workers, and cohorts (assign workers to the same shifts with the same coworkers).
2. **Personal hygiene and personal protective equipment (PPE)**
 - **Hygiene practices and use of required PPE are measures to prevent the spread of communicable diseases, immunizations, and**
3. Managing illness at work
 - Workers' actions including reporting illnesses before arriving at work and while at work and staying home if sick.

Throughout these sections administrative policies and protocols will be discussed.

Personal hygiene and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Why are we still concerned about COVID-19 and other communicable diseases in food processing workplaces?

Food processing facilities are essential to provide food to our communities. However, food processing facilities can also pose a high risk of communicable disease transmission. These workplaces are often crowded with people and equipment, workers may be in close contact for long periods because of production line work, facilities are noisy, requiring workers to shout to be heard, environments are kept cold and moist to protect food, full use of personal protective equipment and barriers can be challenging, outbreaks and clusters have occurred. Workers may live or work in congregate settings, and shift work can lead to crowding in small, shared spaces, such as break rooms. Conditions in food processing facilities may allow rapid transmission of communicable diseases between workers when multiple layers of protection are not present. Worldwide, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) found that food processing facilities have become super spreader sites for COVID-19, leading to many outbreaks, worker deaths, and facility closures.³

Personal hygiene involves hand hygiene and cough and sneeze etiquette (cough and sneeze into elbow sleeve and dispose used tissues in garbage). PPE include masks, gloves, or other items such as appropriate clothing, footwear, hair control such as hats or hair/beard nets, and wound care to protect food from contamination.

Worker personal hygiene

Hand hygiene

Proper hand hygiene is critical to prevent the spread of communicable disease and protect workers, food and consumers. It also prevents transfer of viruses and bacteria between worker hands and surfaces, utensils, packaging, and food items. There are many methods that employers may use to promote and educate proper hand hygiene in the workplace:

- Educate and train workers on how and when to wash hands in the languages they understand; workers should wash their hands with soap and water or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer for at least 20 seconds.
- Post [hand hygiene posters](#) in entrances, washrooms and lunchrooms.
- Regularly schedule handwashing breaks to promote frequent hand hygiene by workers. If required, schedule a relief worker to give line staff an opportunity to wash their hands.
- Place handwashing stations or hand sanitizers with at least 60% alcohol in multiple locations to encourage hand hygiene. If possible, choose hand sanitizer stations that are touch-free. These should be placed at locations where there are major touch points (e.g., at clock-in/out stations) but are not suitable for food production lines.
- Always wash hands with soap and water after using the washroom and before returning to work.
- Gloves are not a substitute for frequent washing of hands.
- Alcohol-based hand sanitizer is not a substitute for frequent washing of hands for workers in direct contact with food.

General hygiene measures

- Encourage workers to cough and sneeze into their elbow and not hands.
- Place used tissues into the garbage immediately and wash hands after.
- Wear clean work wear daily.
- Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth especially when putting on or taking off a face mask.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces such as toilet levers, light switches, door handles, and paper towel dispensers.
- Workers should not be using their cell phones on the production line or within the food processing area.
- Workers who have an open wound cover the wound with a clean bandage and a waterproof covering (e.g., glove). Open or seeping wounds can spread disease.

PPE

Masking

Workers should wear masks during periods of significant community transmission of respiratory diseases, in addition to following facility measures such as physical distancing between workers and ventilation controls to prevent transmission. The communicable disease plan can define periods of respiratory illness based on the following: increased numbers of workers reporting ill from cold or influenza; elevated communicable illness is reported in the community (e.g., notification by public health of a norovirus outbreak at a facility); the opinion of a medical health officer or occupational safety officers at the site; or some other method.

- Medical grade masks may reduce transmission more than disposable non-medical masks or cloth masks⁴
- Masks should be worn at all times while working indoors
- If employers provide masks to workers, ensure that workers are informed of the following:
 - Masks should be handed out with tongs or clean hands
 - Wash hands before putting on and removing masks, and avoid touching eyes or nose;
 - Masks should be worn over the nose and mouth and fit snugly;
 - Masks need to be kept clean and dry (i.e., masks become less effective if wet/damp);
 - Each worker may require a number of masks as a mask will build up moisture during the day and should be changed as required;
 - Masks should be disposed of into a garbage receptacle immediately after removal;
 - If workers use their own masks, they should be instructed on how to properly clean and disinfect them for use the next day (launder and machine dry daily after the shift);
- Do not share reusable PPE such as face shields and gowns between workers, unless they have been cleaned and disinfected.
- First aid attendants should have access to PPE (e.g., medical grade masks, face shields, gloves) to protect themselves in an everyday and emergency situation.

Gloves

Disposable gloves use do not replace hand washing because gloves can become contaminated. Workers must still wash hands frequently.

- Gloves must be changed after carrying out non-food related activities or any activity that presents a risk of contamination to the next task (e.g., before and after handling raw meat).
- Workers should be educated about glove use; when they take off gloves they must wash their hands and avoid touching their mouth or eyes to prevent transfer of contamination and possible infection. They should understand that contamination can occur on gloves and microbes can multiply and build up on gloves, too.

- Implement non-touch alternatives to replace wearing of gloves.

Other PPE use

- Wear appropriate goggles, gloves and protective clothing when mixing or applying cleaners and sanitizers to surfaces.
- Wear hair and beard nets in appropriate locations in the facility to protect food from cross-contamination.
- All workers, visitors, contractors, and maintenance crews must use designated boots, boot covers, and boot sanitizer stations in designated areas.

¹ *Public Health Act*. Food Premises Regulation. Accessed from:

https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/11_210_99

² WorkSafe BC. Communicable Disease Prevention. Accessed from: <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/law-policy/occupational-health-safety/searchable-ohs-regulation/ohs-guidelines/guidelines-for-workers-compensation-act#SectionNumber:G-P2-21>

³ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. August 2021. COVID-19: Guidance for preventing transmission of COVID-19 within food businesses. Updated guidance. Accessed from: <http://www.fao.org/3/cb6030en/cb6030en.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/prevention-risks/masks>