

Uncle Sam's Kitchen

There is an urgent requirement for Uncle Sam's Kitchen to ensure compliance with measures to protect food handlers from contracting COVID-19.

Under the present circumstances due to COVID 19 pandemic, there is an urgent requirement for food industry to ensure compliance with measures to protect food handlers from contracting COVID-19, to prevent exposure to or transmission of the virus, and to strengthen the food hygiene and sanitation practices.

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has laid out a comprehensive guidelines for food businesses, employees/food handlers working in food establishments to prevent spread of COVID-19. These practices are being adopted in conjunction with schedule 4 requirements.

The three major steps to prevent spread of COVID-19 infection are:

- a) Maintain high levels of personal hygiene;
- b) Practice social distancing at all times;
- c) Cleaning and sanitation.

Responsibility of Food Business Owner /Manager

Food business owner/ Manager shall ensure that:

- Apart from good hygiene practices and good manufacturing practices mentioned in schedule 4 of FSS (Licensing and Registration of Food Businesses) Regulations, 2011, food handlers / workers are being made aware about COVID-19 symptoms so that they are able to recognise the symptoms early and that they can seek appropriate medical care and testing, and to minimise the risk of infecting fellow workers. They are being provided with training on risk factors, safe food handling, social distancing and other protective behaviours (e.g., cough etiquette and wearing of face mask, hand washing with soap or using of alcohol-based hand rubs) required amid COVID-19 infections.
- Employers have a COVID-19 screening protocol in place to screen all personnel entering the premises. All employees/workers/visitors are being screened at entry point for symptoms of COVID-19 such as temperature (using non-contact type thermometer), cough, cold, etc. Those with temperature more than 37.5 °C (99 °F) and/or flu like symptoms are not be allowed to enter establishment.
- Employees /food handlers/ visitors are being encouraged to self declare and inform about any signs/symptoms of respiratory illness before or during work/visit to the premises. Such declaration is expected to be forthcoming with the assurance of assistance and pay/ job protection especially in the low income group of employees. In some cases, infected people may be asymptomatic or pre-

symptomatic and may not display any signs or symptoms of disease or may present with mild symptoms that can be easily overlooked, the employers therefore ensure the availability of masks and protective gears to all food handlers. In case the food handler is COVID-19 infected or is identified as the contact of the COVID-19 infected person, he/she is allowed to enter the premises and instructed to remain in home quarantine for the specified time period and should not return to work until they are free of infection.

- 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 employer. Wearing mask and protective gears at all times should be ensured. The Employers must provision and issue these protective gears to his employees. The employee should maintain 1 metre of distance from each other and practice social distancing in the workplace.
- Employer should be aware and sensitive of workers concerns about salary, leave, safety, health, and other issues that may arise during the outbreak.
- A local emergency response team is established to deal with suspected COVID-19 infections and one person is designated as the COVID-19 co-ordinator. His contact details have been shared with all employees.

The team should develop protocols/guidelines on the steps to be taken when handling suspected COVID-19 cases and as a means of general preparedness, the following are ensured:

- List of local authorized hospitals for COVID-19 testing and treatment is frequently updated;
- Contact details of the professional disinfection company are kept handy;
- Adequate disinfectant for emergency use are available;
- Dedicated masks, gloves, safety glasses, protection suits for emergency use (personal protective equipment or PPE) are procured and stored as per government advisories, from time to time;
- Isolation rooms (one for suspected cases, one for close contacts) are prepared with special trash bins;
- A process for record keeping is established wherein all the related information - attendance, health status of employees, visitor details - are maintained. Process for record keeping shall be developed for suspected/ confirmed cases and should be recorded, including, but not limited to employee name, the whole process of the incident, conversations with local authorities, actions taken by the company.

Personal Hygiene of Food Handlers

Food Business shall ensure that high hygiene standards in line with established Food Safety Management System(FSMS) and these practices include:

- Proper hand hygiene — washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds (follow WHO advice)
- Frequent use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers;
- Good respiratory hygiene (covers mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing; dispose of tissues and wash hands)
- Frequent cleaning/disinfection of work surfaces and touch points such as door handles.
- Avoiding close contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing.
- Proper hand hygiene protocols should be strictly followed. They shall thoroughly wash and sanitize hands and change into clean uniform before entering the food premise. Hands should be washed for 20 to 30 seconds using water (preferably hot water) and soap. Hands should be dried with clean towel or air dryers.
- This should preferably be followed with sanitizing of hands (with 70% alcohol based sanitizer or an equivalent). If soap and running water are not immediately available, provide alcohol-based hand rubs containing at least 60-70% alcohol.
- Employees/ food handlers shall wear face mask and clean protective clothing like full sleeves clothes/aprons, head gears, caps, gloves at all times while in the production area. In case of shortage of face masks the employees/ food handlers should preferably use clean cloth-based face covering or face mask to cover nose and mouth.
- The face cover should fit perfectly on face without leaving any gaps on mouth, nose and chin. The face covers should be changed every six hours or as soon as they get wet. Reusable face covers shall be cleaned and sanitized thoroughly. In case disposable face covers are used or reusable face cover is damaged or changes shape, it shall be disposed of in a closed bin.
- While removing face cover, care shall be taken not to touch outer surface of the face cover. Employees shall avoid touching their face, eyes, nose, etc. after removal of face cover before washing their hands.(Note: Staff should wash/disinfect hands after removing their regular clothes and before touching their clean uniforms to avoid contamination of clean clothes).
- Employees shall preferably not use personal jewellery, watches etc. Instruments like mobiles should be discouraged while at work place or should be frequently sanitised.

- Use of fingerprint or biometric attendance shall be discontinued during the pandemic period in order to minimise cross infection through this common contact point and may be replaced with facial recognition or manual system ensuring minimal physical contact. Using each other's phones, belongings, sharing of common stationery like pens, or other work tools and equipment, should be discouraged.
- 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 are carried out. In such a case, the gloves shall be changed and suitably disposed off. Hand must be washed between glove change and when gloves are removed.
- Wearing gloves may give a false sense of security and may result in staff not washing hands as frequently as required. Employees shall be trained on the correct method of using gloves and wearing gloves shall not be considered as a substitute for hand washing.
- The food premises, toilets, counters and equipment that came in contact with the infected person should be thoroughly cleaned with hot water and detergent and disinfected (with 0.1% hypochlorite sol. or an equivalent).

To implement social distancing, USK should:

- Limit the number of people in contact on a production floor or a kitchen or a shop , by creating physical barriers so that people in smaller spaces (3-4 employees in 10 ft areas as an example) can have barriers without hindering work, wherever possible.
- Space out/stagger workstations and food preparation areas, if possible. There should be 1 meter gap between food handlers.
- Reduce the speed of production lines to reduce the number of staff working on the production line and increase the gap between them.
- Review the shift arrangement and social interaction of the staff. Increase time between shifts/scatter break periods to minimize staff interaction. This will also help in ensuring more time for cleaning and sanitation.
- Limit the number of people (staff, delivery drivers, customers) who can come into the food premises at any one time.
- Use spacing measures (e.g. floor markers, stickers) at tills or queues, increase the gaps between workstations, seating arrangements, etc to ensure at least 1 meter gap is maintained between employees, customers and visitors.

- Prohibit sharing of lockers by employees and a gap of at least one meter is maintained by employees while using the lockers.
- For food deliveries, prefer leaving food packets outside the door or maintain a gap of 1-metre from the customer.
- Takeaways and food deliveries should be encouraged instead of dine-in options.(Note: To avoid crowding at a place, a ticketing system may be adopted).
- Face-to-face meetings are being restricted as much as possible. The management should identify the roles or areas within a business that may be able to work from home or away from other staff. Avoid staff congregating in car parks or other common areas after their shift.

Cleaning and Sanitation

- Food premise shall be always well maintained and cleaned thoroughly and sanitized daily. Cleaning and sanitation requirements mentioned in schedule 4 shall be strictly followed.
- 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 cleaned with soap and water, followed by disinfection (using freshly prepared 1 percent hypochlorite solution or any other disinfectant found to be effective against coronavirus).
- Equipment, containers, utensils, cutlery, etc. should be cleaned thoroughly with soap and water. Preferably use hot water (above 60 °C) for washing and sanitising.
- High touch points (such as elevator buttons, handrails / handles and call buttons, escalator handrails, 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 twice daily by mopping with a linen/absorbable cloth soaked in 1 percent sodium hypochlorite.
- In case of metallic surfaces like door handles, security locks, 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 surface.
- Toilets and washrooms shall be cleaned after every shift using water and detergent. This shall be followed with disinfection using 1 percent hypochlorite solution or an equivalent. For metallic surfaces (such as shower, taps, etc.) and surfaces where use of bleach is not suitable, use 70 percent alcohol based disinfectant.

- In case any food handler coughs or sneezes without following respiratory hygiene or develops any flu like symptoms, an area of two meters around the person shall be immediately vacated, thoroughly cleaned and disinfected using freshly prepared 1 percent hypochlorite solution or any other disinfectant found to be effective against novel coronavirus. The toilet, counters and equipment that came in contact with the suspected COVID 19 patient shall be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected using 1 percent hypochlorite solution or 70 percent alcohol (in case of metallic surfaces).
- All cleaning equipment, cloth, mops, reusable protective gear such as boots, gloves etc. shall be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected after use and prior to use in other areas.

Special Instructions for Retail Division(SC)

Retail food premises and other food services that need to remain open to cater the needs of the general public during this public health emergency do face a greater challenge in maintaining the hygiene standards of hand washing and respiratory etiquette to protect the staff and the consumers. Besides continuing to follow the established protocols and hygiene practices for retailing, the important COVID 19 recommendations for different sectors are as under:

Food Service /Delivery/Takeaways

- Food service area shall be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected after every meal prepared and disinfect surfaces repeatedly touched by employees or customers such as door knobs, equipment handles, check-out counters, and grocery cart handles, etc.
- Hand washing facility should be made available to the workers and if that is not possible hand sanitizers should be placed at the entry of the retail stores and used accordingly.
- 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. The virus is likely to be inactivated by proper cooking temperatures; it is important to use gloves or other barriers to prevent touching foods that will not be fully cooked.
- No ready-to-eat food item shall be left open and shall be kept covered or in glass displays.
- Employees shall wear clean uniform, mask, face cover, gloves and head covers at all times. Pre-screening of the workers for COVID-19 symptoms should be followed. Individuals showcasing COVID-19 symptoms should be sent to the health facility for further evaluation and encouraged to stay home.
- All food items shall be thoroughly washed. Fruits and vegetables (to be consumed raw) shall be washed in 5 ppm chlorine (or equivalent solution) and clean potable water before storage.
- Prepare for fewer customers and make plans for take-out and delivery options that will work with the available staff and supply resources. Use social media to communicate with your local customers.

- No ready-to-eat food item shall be left open and shall be kept covered or in glass displays. Use gloves to avoid direct bare hand contact with ready-to-eat foods.
- There should be visible notices pasted, for staff promoting hand hygiene and physical distancing.
- Help customers to maintain social distancing by way of encouraging spacing between the customers while in line for service or check out in accordance to the social distancing norms (minimum 1 meter gap). Establish designated pick-up zones for customers to help maintain social distancing.

Buffet system, food service and mass gathering should be disallowed during COVID-19 pandemic; such services shall be resumed only under directions from the concerned Statutory Authorities. In case such services are allowed by the authorities, food establishment shall ensure that:

- Dedicated food handler(s) should serve food items to customers instead of multiple customers using the serving spoons.
- Minimum 1 meter gap is maintained between the food handler and customer.
- Minimum 1 meter gap is maintained between the seating space and tables in the service area.
- High touch points such as countertops, tongs, ladles, handles, etc. should be cleaned and disinfected frequently. (Note: During lockdown period, food service is limited to community kitchens, staff cafeterias of essential food business.)
- In future, if other food service establishments are permitted to resume service during Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic, they shall abide by the following guidelines).

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

- Face is covered with a clean mask or a face cover, hands are sanitised before food pick up and after delivery.
- Social distancing is followed by maintaining a minimum 1 meter gap between self and customer.
- Contact with common touch points such as door bell, handles, etc is avoided. If unavoidable, hands are sanitised after coming in contact with common touch points. Contactless delivery methods shall be encouraged.
- Customers shall be encouraged to place orders online or on telephone, well in advance. This will help in reducing the wait time at the food establishment.
- Employees shall refrain from handling cash. In case cash is handled, employees shall wash or sanitise their hands afterwards. Customers shall be encouraged to use contactless modes of payments such as

UPI, QR codes, net-banking, e-wallets, etc. In case credit/debit cards are used, the card machine shall be sanitised with 70 % alcohol after each use.

- If possible, food businesses shall provide disposable menu, utensils, cutlery, and single use sachet (of salt pepper, sugar, ketchup, etc) instead of reusable utensils, cutlery, bottles or salt shakers; else the same should be frequently cleaned, after each use.

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

- Face is covered with a clean mask or a face cover; hands are sanitised before food pick up and after delivery.
- Social distancing is followed by maintaining a minimum 1 meter gap between self and customer.
- Contact with common touch points such as door bell, handles, etc. should be avoided. If unavoidable, hands should be sanitised after coming in contact with common touch points.
- Contactless delivery shall be encouraged.
- Employees shall refrain from handling cash. In case cash is handled, employees shall wash or sanitise their hands afterwards. Customers shall be encouraged to use contactless modes of payments such as UPI, QR codes, e-wallets, etc. In case credit/debit cards are used, the card machine shall be sanitised with 70 percent alcohol after each use.

Food Transportation or distribution

- Drivers, loaders and other support staff shall be trained about the COVID-19 infection symptoms and its prevention by following high standards of hygiene, cleaning and sanitation and following social distancing.
- Delivery/transport vehicles shall be cleaned and sanitized (and if possible, disinfected) regularly. This vehicle should only be used for food deliveries/distribution. Cleaning and sanitation records should be available in the vehicle at all times.
- Drivers, loaders and other support staff displaying flu like or COVID-19 symptoms shall refrain from handling/transporting/delivering food.
- 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.
- Drivers, loaders and other support staff should avoid using public toilets as much as possible.

- Drivers and other staff delivering to food premises should not leave their vehicles during delivery (if possible), and shall refrain from stopping in between for tea breaks, etc.
- If a vehicle enters an area marked as a COVID-19 hotspot, then the vehicle shall be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected before use.

Food Packaging

Recent research evaluated the survival of the COVID-19 virus on different surfaces and reported that the virus can remain viable for up to 72 hours on plastic and stainless steel, up to four hours on copper, and up to 24 hours on cardboard. This research was conducted under laboratory conditions (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, social distancing. All measures shall be adopted to ensure that food packaging is kept clean and away from sources of contamination.