

COVID 19 RESPONSE:

Farm and Food-Safety FAQs Answered by UF/IFAS Scientists

With many things uncertain during the COVID-19 crisis, farmers and consumers are searching for answers about food safety. To provide the correct data, we asked three experts with the UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) to answer common questions:

- Mark Ritenour, a UF/IFAS professor of postharvest physiology and handling.
- Keith Schneider, a UF/IFAS professor of food safety.
- Amy Simonne, a UF/IFAS professor of food safety and quality.

Q. What sanitation practices are currently in place on farms?

A. All but a relative few of the smallest fresh produce farms are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Produce Safety Rule, which includes requirements for human health and hygiene and the cleaning and sanitation of equipment that comes in contact with the edible product.

Such requirements include provisions for excluding sick employees from touching fresh produce and equipment that contacts the fresh produce. All employees must also be trained in principles and practices to maintain good personal hygiene including the importance of, and proper methods of washing hands, maintaining good general personal cleanliness, maintaining clean and sanitary clothing including aprons and gloves.

Q. What about sanitation practices during the processing and post-harvest stages?

A. Fruit and vegetable packinghouses and processing plants are also regulated either under the FDA Produce Safety Rule, Preventive Controls Rule, or are under a Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) program. These programs all ensure the safe handling of fresh produce during harvest, packing and processing.

For fresh fruits and vegetables, specific buyers also often require adherence to one of several other food safety schemes, each with its own specific requirements. Those who transport fresh fruits and vegetables are also regulated with regards to food safety and are required to adhere to FDA's Sanitary Transportation Rule.

Q. Should these sanitation practices be adjusted in the time of COVID-19?

A. Food safety practices and training already take into account foodborne pathogens, which includes viruses, that might be transmitted by food.

To date, there is no evidence that food or food packaging has been associated with transmission of COVID-19.

Current training in maintaining good personal hygiene and the exclusion of sick workers has already been stressed as both important for preventing contamination of food with human pathogens, but also important for preventing transmission of disease among workers. However, the ease with which COVID-19 is transmitted means additional scrutiny is needed to minimize the spread of the virus between employees. While all social distancing practices are not always possible within agricultural production, packing and processing operations, employees should follow the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines to the best extent possible.**

COVID-19 reinforces how important these good hygiene and food safety practices are.

There is no evidence that COVID-19 is foodborne. Washing fresh produce before eating is a good idea to remove soil. You don't have to wash pre-bagged salad mixes, as they have been washed. It is NOT recommended to wash produce with dish soap or any detergent at home. These household detergents or soaps can be dangerous and can lead to vomiting and diarrhea.

Q. What can farm managers do to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 contaminating produce?

- A.** Follow all existing food safety requirements and continue creating a culture of food safety and good personal hygiene within the organization. It requires active participation and attentiveness by all levels of employees within the company.

Social distancing and trying not to come in close contact are difficult to do in some farm and processing settings. It is important to adjust when possible. UF/IFAS has provided specific guidance on this within UF/IFAS **EDIS publications**.

Q. What cleaning products are recommended on-farm to sanitize while keeping produce safe?

- A.** There are several products labeled and available for cleaning and sanitizing equipment, water systems, and even allowed for contact with fresh produce. The product chosen is usually a factor of which fits best with the process in question, environmental conditions and characteristics of the product itself. Consult with suppliers and seek out relevant literature like UF/IFAS **EDIS publications** or UF/IFAS Extension faculty about which products might be best for a particular situation.

Q. Are there any rumors related to this topic that you would like to address?

- A.** Seek out authoritative sources to determine if a new fad on social media is really justified or even safe. For example, some have encouraged people to wash fresh produce with a detergent or items like household dish soap. These are not approved for fruit contact and the food may absorb the product and ingesting this can cause adverse health issues. Some detergents may be used during washing in fresh produce packinghouses, but these are specifically formulated and registered for contact with fresh produce.

There's no need to disinfect groceries to prevent COVID-19, health officials **say**. Numerous sources, including the **CDC**, echo this. Ingestion of soap and detergents can cause gastrointestinal distress. Household cleaning products can contain chemicals that are not meant to be ingested or used on porous surfaces (like cardboard).

Here are **tips** from the FDA that UF/IFAS Extension recommends:

- » Wash your hands for 20 seconds with warm water and soap before and after preparing fresh produce.
- » If damage or bruising occurs before eating or handling, cut away the damaged or bruised areas before preparing or eating.
- » Rinse produce BEFORE you peel it, so dirt and bacteria aren't transferred from the knife onto the fruit or vegetable.