

COVID 19 RESPONSE:

Your grocery and food-safety questions answered

It's a battle of facts vs. myths in the rush to get information to the public about how consumers can safely shop for groceries and handle food during the coronavirus pandemic. To get the correct data, we asked three experts with the UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) to answer common questions:

- Keith Schneider, a UF/IFAS professor of food safety.
- Andrea Nikolai, a family and consumer sciences agent with UF/IFAS Extension Polk County.
- Amy Simonne, professor of food safety and quality.

Q. Should people try to leave their groceries for three days in their car or garage to prevent the spread of COVID-19?

A. First off, don't leave any perishable foods outside, that could lead to a foodborne illness. Next, there is no evidence that COVID-19 is foodborne. If you're worried about the surfaces of the food items carrying the virus, the best advice is to wash your hands after stocking these items. We've been fielding questions about wiping down cans and boxes with sanitizers. If consumers want to wipe boxes or cans with sanitary wipes, they need to make sure that these chemicals do not contact the food as some of these chemicals can be harmful if consumed. If you feel your are in a high-risk group, you can use sanitizing wipes to wipe down boxes and can, but this is not recommended. Hand washing before and after shopping, and social distancing, are still the best methods to reduce disease.

Produce is another area about which we get a lot of questions. Again, 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. I can't repeat this enough: As of now there is no evidence of foodborne transfer. No such warning from [CDC](#) has been issued.

The best advice is to wash your hands before and after shopping.

Q. Can we use cash to make purchases?

A. Yes you can, but cash should be treated like any other surface you touch. After touching anything that another person has touched you need to wash your hands or use a gel sanitizer. This is especially problematic when you're going through a drive-thru where soap and water are not available.

Q. Should people disinfect groceries?

A. There's no need to disinfect groceries to prevent COVID-19, health officials [say](#). Numerous sources, including the [CDC](#), echo this.

Minimize your risk upon entering a grocery store. Use hand sanitizer when entering the store and sanitize or wash your hands as soon as possible after leaving. Many grocery stores are following CDC guidelines on cleaning and sanitizing. Sanitize your shopping cart handle before you begin shopping.

You can protect yourself and others by following a couple of suggestions:

- First, avoid touching multiple produce items when making selections. If possible, use hand sanitizer before and after selecting produce items. Also, avoid touching surfaces or items unnecessarily. And, avoid touching your mouth, nose or face. It's an important new habit to practice these days.
- Second, try to maintain social distancing as much as possible. It's hard to resist visiting when you see a friend or neighbor, but shopping trips are no longer social outings. Limit personal interactions and try to maintain a six-foot distance. If another shopper is too close for comfort, kindly ask for safe space. Some stores have placed floor decals for safe spacing near registers—a great idea that will help us help one another.

We're hearing about people wearing gloves in grocery stores. This is not always a good thing if you put the gloves on without washing your hands first. If you don't change gloves properly, you can cross-contaminate different things.

Q. Should people wash or soak fruits or vegetables in soapy water for 20 seconds?

A. No. There is no evidence of foodborne transfer of COVID-19. Ingestion of soap and detergents can could gastrointestinal distress.

Some doctors tell people to wash fruit and vegetables with soap. This is a "no-no." 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.