



ADVISORY FOR FOOD BUSINESSES ON SAFE FOOD PRACTICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic currently facing the world has resulted in various measures being taken to ensure public safety. The measures include closure of many businesses, schools, and institutes of education, and restrictions on travel and social gatherings. According to the Food & Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the COVID-19 pandemic poses a substantial risk to agricultural input and the overall food supply chain. Therefore, in most countries, food service establishments are required to continue with their daily functions at their normal places of work, with some changes, as their tasks cannot be accomplished remotely. The obvious reason being that food is essential for the health and wellbeing of all. Therefore, ensuring that all workers in the food production and food supply chains are healthy and able to provide safe and nutritious food is essential in combatting and eventual survival of any pandemic.

Critical agricultural seasons, livestock movements for pasture and water, harvesting activities cannot be put on hold as we tackle the virus. Without support, many vulnerable people, especially in the NE of Nigeria will be forced to rely on humanitarian assistance just to survive – a humanitarian system already stretched to its limits before COVID-19. It could exacerbate already severe food insecurity, particularly in areas affected by conflict, and among refugees and IDPs

Due to the nature of this pandemic, food regulatory agencies are running at reduced capacities and its officers are not able to monitor, as expected, food production/service premises to assure the integrity of food safety systems across the country. The onus is therefore on the food manufacturers to liaise with the relevant food regulatory agencies such as National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), Standards Organisation of Nigeria (SON), and Nigeria Agricultural Quarantine Service (NAQS) for advice to ensure that food produced, marketed and sold are safe and wholesome for consumption.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this advisory is to bring up possible measures that food establishments and food retail markets can put in place to assure the integrity of the food supply chain across the country during the COVID-19 pandemic.

POSSIBILITY OF COVID-19 TRANSMISSION VIA FOOD

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it is highly unlikely that people can contract COVID-19 from food or food packaging. There has not been any evidence of respiratory viruses being transmitted via food or food packaging. However, because SARS-COV-2 virus is transmitted through respiratory droplets that are too heavy to remain in air, they may land on objects and surfaces around an infected person and thereby infect others who touch the contaminated surfaces and then touch their own face, mouth, nose, or eyes.

Openly displayed foods at open markets (i.e. neighbourhood open food markets) are a source of concern for most people, but there is currently no evidence of transmission of SARS-COV-2 virus associated with food in open markets. Though, consumers are required, as usual, to wash fruits

and vegetables with potable water and ensure good personal and respiratory hygiene around open food items.

ENSURING SAFE FOOD AND PREVENTING COVID-19 IN FOOD BUSINESSES

Most well-established food businesses are expected to have some form of Food Safety Management Systems (FSMS) in place, such as Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP), Good Hygiene Practice (GHP) and Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) to manage food safety hazards and risks. The provisions from these FSMSs laid down the foundation for ensuring safe foods at each stage of the food processing, manufacture, and marketing chain for the prevention of food contamination. There is therefore the urgent responsibility for all food business operators to ensure that there are adequate measures in place to protect workers from contracting COVID-19 as well as strengthen food hygiene and sanitation, generally embracing safe food handling practices.

In addition, it is imperative for the food business operators to:

1. Provide adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) such as face masks, hair nets, disposable gloves and clean overalls while ensuring that food handlers use them to reduce the spread of viruses and disease within the food establishment;
2. Strengthen its personal hygiene procedures by conducting training where needed on GHP to eliminate or reduce the risk of food surfaces and food packaging materials from becoming contaminated with the SARS-COV-2 virus by food handlers and develop protocol to check health. Measures may include:
 - a. Ensuring regular washing and sanitising of all food contact surfaces and utensils;
 - b. Ensuring all food handlers frequently and effectively wash hands for at least 20 seconds especially after going to the bathroom, before eating, after blowing their nose, coughing or sneezing using WHO guideline on hand washing. And, if using gloves, these must be changed before and after preparing food or when a glove is torn or dirty – disposable gloves should not be used as a substitute for hand washing;
 - c. Ensuring that body temperature of staff is monitored before, during and after shift;
 - d. Ensuring that disposable face masks are changed once damp and are appropriately disposed;
 - e. Make sure that food handlers frequently clean and sanitise counters trays and serving utensils/equipment, ensuring safe and correct application of disinfectant; and
 - f. Ensuring fumigation is done as at when due.
3. Make available NAFDAC registered hand sanitiser for consumers on their way in and out of the food premises;
4. Introduce and enforce physical distancing measures in the food establishment by:
 - a. Adjusting the positioning of processing lines staff so that they are not facing one another;

- b. Spacing out workstations;
 - c. Limiting the number of staff in a food preparation area at any one time, may consider increased number of shifts;
 - d. Reducing interaction between groups;
5. Designate a person who is responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns. Employees should know who this person is and how to contact them.
 6. Consider decreasing open business hours to perform more frequent deep cleans and ensure this is well communicated to customers.
 7. Post signs/infographics on how to stop the spread of Covid-19 and promote everyday protective measures through:
 - a. Good ventilation system;
 - b. Intermediate position of trash cans;
 - c. Make hand washing sinks accessible and fully stocked (e.g. soap, paper towels, hand wash sign and trash bins); and
 - d. Provide paper towels and trash cans in the bathroom so doors can be opened and closed without touching handle directly

ENSURING SAFE FOOD AND PREVENTING COVID-19 IN RETAIL STORES AND OPEN MARKET

The greatest challenge during this period will be ensuring that the risk of spread of SARS-COV-2 virus is minimised in the food retail sector. Personal hygiene of food handlers in retail premises is critical in reducing the risk of transmission of most viruses and if they are adhered to, will prevent the contamination of food or food packaging.

However, keeping physical distance for both retailers and handlers at food premises is also critical for reducing the risk of transmission of this virus. To ensure personal hygiene and physical distancing, the following measures may be used:

1. Regular sensitisation exercise for retail store staff on personal hygiene and physical distancing;
2. Periodic sensitisation exercise for open market sellers by market association on the need for personal and respiratory hygiene as well as physical distancing;
3. Reduce number of hours of operation in open market by sellers;
4. Staggered selling times for market sellers;
5. Regulating the numbers of customers who enter the retail store and open markets (if possible) to avoid overcrowding;
6. Designate specific entry and exit points into and out of premises (where possible);
7. Checking of body temperatures of customers where possible at entry points and disallowing customer with temperature above 37 degree Celsius;
8. Keeping doors wide open where possible to reduce contact;
9. Putting advisories signs at strategic locations at stores and markets requesting customers;
 - a. Not to enter the shop if they are unwell or have COVID19 symptoms;

- b. With their own shopping bags, to clean them before every use
10. Controlling queues consistent with physical distancing advice both inside and outside stores;
11. Providing hand sanitisers, spray disinfectants, and disposable paper towels at store entry points;
12. Using floor markings inside the retail store to facilitate compliance with the physical distancing, particularly in the most crowded areas, such as serving counters and tills;
13. Making regular announcements to remind customers to follow physical distancing advice and clean their hands regularly;
14. Introducing relevant “transparent” or “Plexiglass” barriers at counters as protection for staff;
15. Encouraging the use of contactless payments such as bank transfers where possible and if exchanging notes:
 - a. Do not touch your face afterward;
 - b. Ask customers to place cash on the counter rather than directly into your hand;
 - c. Ensure money is picked up with gloves afterwards;
 - d. Place money directly on the counter when providing change back to customers;
 - e. Wipe counter between each customer at checkout.;
16. Providing wipes (or other sanitising material) for customers to clean the handles of shopping trolleys and baskets; or assigning staff to disinfect handles of shopping trolleys after each use;
17. Placing advisory posters in strategic areas for:
 - a. Coughing and sneezing etiquette;
 - b. Good use of facial masks; and
 - c. Good personal hygiene;
18. Prohibit the display of fruits and vegetables on the ground at open markets;
19. Encourage regular/proper use of face masks by restaurant food handlers and chefs;
20. Periodic disinfection of market surfaces and floors;
21. Put on hold, where possible, the self-serve of buffets; and
22. Ensure Good Environmental Practice (GEP) is practiced.

ENSURING SAFE TRANSPORT OF FOOD

Staff entering and leaving business premises such as ‘delivery staff’ delivering food to various homes are at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19. Drivers/Riders can pick up this virus when they touch surfaces such as gate/door handles, steering wheels, mobile payment devices and/or shake hands with infected person. Some of the measure to protect delivery drivers may include:

1. Delivery staff should not leave the vehicle during delivery, where possible;
2. Drivers should have or be supplied with requisite PPEs, disinfectant, paper towels and alcohol-based hand sanitisers;

3. Drivers/riders should use hand sanitisers before and after passing food items or delivery notes to customers;
4. If using reusable containers, drivers need to observe appropriate hygiene and sanitation protocols;
5. When picking up items, drivers also need to remember to keep physical distance, avoid handshakes and wear necessary PPEs such as hand gloves and face masks;
6. Delivery staff also need to ensure that empty containers are cleaned and disinfected before it is returned into the food business premises;
7. Delivery staff should be aware or trained of the potential risks involved in contact transmission of COVID-19;
8. Drivers need to maintain a high degree of personal cleanliness and to wear clean protective clothing; and
9. Drivers also need to be aware that food must be protected from contamination and must be separated from other goods that may cause contamination.

COVID-19 IN FOOD BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

As with requirements for sick staff in any FSMS, there should be written instruction on the who, where, when and how to report sicknesses. And according to WHO, staff or food handlers who are unwell should, under no condition be at a food business premise. This is because when an infected person handles food, it is possible to introduce virus to the work surfaces such as counter tops, food preparation surfaces, cash register, door handles, etc. It is therefore important that a telephone or email protocol for reporting sickness should be provided at food establishments.

However, if a staff is feeling unwell or showing symptoms of COVID-19, food managers should do the following:

1. Find a well-ventilated room or area for staff, if possible, and immediately contact Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) via its Toll-free number: 080097000010 or contact the respective State COVID-19 emergency numbers while you wait for proper advice;
2. If an employee tests positive to COVID-19, notify all known contacts of the employee as well as follow other instructions by NCDC;
3. Clean and disinfect all surfaces that the infected employee has come into contact with. All surfaces as highlighted above must be disinfected with alcohol-based disinfectant of concentrations above 70%;
4. Closure of food business premises is not recommended;
5. Pending specific instructions by NCDC, staff who have not had contact with the original confirmed case should continue their daily duties while taking usual infection prevention and control measures.
6. Infected staff who have fully recovered from COVID-19 should be allowed to return to work with the appropriate personal hygiene requirements in place.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Websites

www.health.gov.ng
www.nafdac.gov.ng
www.ncdc.gov.ng

Email Addresses

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

