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COVID-19

CDC has updated its guidance for people who are fully vaccinated. See [Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People](#).

Considerations for Food Pantries and Food Distribution Sites

Updated June 22, 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges to food security across the U.S. Access to healthy food options and nutrition are important to overall physical and mental health and well-being. Food insecurity is expected to continue to increase for many households with more children not attending childcare and school in-person (a source of nutritious meals for many students) and with changes in employment status during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Find [food and food system resources](#) during COVID-19 for individuals seeking assistance, food assistance programs, and food system stakeholders.

Food pantries and food distribution sites provide donated food at no cost to people who have limited access and play an important role in communities. Community organizations often work with food pantries to provide food to families. Food pantries can have their own building, be in schools or churches, be mobile (e.g., in a truck), or distribute food in other ways, such as drive-through pickup distribution. Managers of food pantries and distribution sites should take special precautions to help staff, volunteers, and clients stay safe while continuing to prioritize the respect and dignity of clients.

Managers of food pantries and food distribution sites can consider these steps to help ensure safe access to food for their clients while helping prevent the spread of COVID-19. These considerations are meant to supplement—not replace—any state, tribal, local, and territorial health and safety laws, rules, and regulations with which organizations must comply. Food pantry and distribution site managers can determine, in collaboration with [state, tribal, local, and territorial health officials](#), whether and how to implement these considerations, making adjustments to meet the unique needs and circumstances of the local community.

Planners and managers of food pantries and food distribution sites may also benefit from reviewing CDC's COVID-19 guidance and considerations on [community-based organizations](#), [workplaces](#), [events and gatherings](#), and [grocery and food retail workers](#).

Planners and managers should review CDC's information on [people at increased risk for severe illness](#), employers with workers at high risk, and [people experiencing homelessness](#). Extra precautions should be provided for staff, volunteers, and clients who may be at higher risk of severe illness or may be experiencing homelessness to protect them from exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19.

Operational Considerations

- Follow state, tribal, local, and territorial regulatory agency policies related to group gatherings and determine whether food distribution operations need to be adapted to continue client access to food resources while accommodating any such restrictions.

- Determine the mode of food distribution to use based on local policies and [local level of spread](#).
 - Food pantry managers should continually assess how to modify their mode of food distribution (e.g., delivering to clients or using onsite pick-up) based on current levels of spread in each community they serve.
 - Delivery of food items in ways that minimize in-person interactions are lower risk than onsite, indoor modes of distribution.
- Consider expanding hours to help stagger the times that both staff/volunteers and clients are present at the facility.
- Require all staff and volunteers to [wash their hands](#) before, after, and frequently during shifts and to [wear masks](#), if feasible.
- Consider regular [symptom](#) screenings of staff, volunteers, and clients who come onsite.
- Include accessibility accommodations for people with disabilities if changes in set up or distribution mode or the context of COVID-19 presents new challenges. For example, ensure food products are stacked to a height reachable from a wheelchair in onsite pantries. Make sure signage about new protocols are adapted for lower literacy audiences and available in different languages spoken by clients served.

Select modes of distribution

Delivery

- Based on the level of spread in your community and the safety and accessibility of transportation options, pre-packing and delivering food items to individuals and families may present the lowest risk of COVID-19 spread with greatest reach. This option is also best to serve clients who need to stay home because they are sick, have recently had contact with someone who is sick, or are at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19.
 - Establish a drop-off location (such as a doorstep) and time to deliver food without any physical contact, when clients will be available and able to bring food inside for proper storage right away.
 - Try to include enough food variety and account for family size and any dietary or infant feeding needs and religious or cultural preferences.
 - Include multiple days of food and, when possible, enough food for at least a week to help reduce the number of interactions needed.
 - To promote healthy habits and nutritional education, consider adapting a choice model for the delivery mode. Distribute lists of options ahead of time and gather client selections over the phone prior to delivery, so that clients can receive their preferred food products.

Onsite distribution

- If possible, distribute food outdoors.
- If resources are available, consider having hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol and masks (can be disposable as a more affordable option) at the entrance for clients to use upon entering.
- Consider ways to schedule client times onsite to limit the number of people at any given time and to prevent crowds.
- Modify the layout, as needed, to facilitate social distancing between staff, volunteers, and clients (maintaining a distance of at least 6 feet between people).
- Consider providing a drive-through model in which clients can receive a box of food placed directly in their vehicle by staff or volunteers.

Choice pantries

- Choice pantries are distribution sites that are set up like a grocery store. Clients come in and choose their food products while accompanied by a volunteer. While choice pantries are considered the best model for food pantries from a nutritional standpoint, special considerations should be made if COVID-19 is spreading in the community, and pantries should operate in accordance with local public health policies.
- Use the same operational considerations (scheduling staggered shifts, mask protocols, setting up outside, etc.) as onsite distribution.
- Because choice pantries are similar in design to grocery stores, managers, staff, and volunteers should consider CDC's [information for grocery store and food retail employees](#).

Cleaning and disinfection

When to Clean

Cleaning with products containing soap or detergent reduces germs on surfaces and objects by removing contaminants and may weaken or damage some of the virus particles, which decreases risk of infection from surfaces.

[Cleaning high touch surfaces and shared objects once a day is usually enough](#) to sufficiently remove virus that may be on surfaces unless someone with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 has been in your facility. Disinfecting (using disinfectants on [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\)'s List N](#) [↗](#)) removes any remaining germs on surfaces, which further reduces any risk of spreading infection. For more information on cleaning your facility regularly and cleaning your facility when someone is sick, see [Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility](#)

When to Disinfect

You may want to either clean more frequently or choose to disinfect (in addition to cleaning) in shared spaces if certain conditions apply that can increase the risk of infection from touching surfaces.

- High transmission of COVID-19 in your community
- Low number of people wearing masks
- Infrequent hand hygiene
- The space is occupied by people at [increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19](#)

If there has been a sick person or someone who tested positive for COVID-19 in your facility within the last 24 hours, you should clean AND disinfect the space.

Use Disinfectants Safely

Always read and [follow the directions](#) on how to use and store cleaning and disinfecting products. [Ventilate](#) the space when using these products.

Always follow standard practices and appropriate regulations specific to your facility for minimum standards for cleaning and disinfection. For more information on cleaning and disinfecting, see [Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility](#).

Encourage staying home when sick or recently had close contact with someone with COVID-19

- Educate staff, volunteers, and clients about when they should [stay home](#) and when it is safe [to be around others](#).
 - Develop policies that encourage sick staff to stay at home without fear of reprisal, and ensure staff are aware of these policies.
 - Staff, volunteers, and clients* should [stay home](#) if they have tested positive for or are showing COVID-19 [symptoms](#).
 - Staff, volunteers, and clients* who have recently had [close contact](#) with a person with symptoms of or diagnosed with COVID-19 should also [stay home and monitor their health](#).
 - Refer to [CDC's guidance](#) to determine how long staff, volunteers, clients should stay home. Determining when it is safe to be around others varies for different situations:
 - [If they have been sick with COVID-19](#)
 - [If they tested positive for COVID-19 but had no symptoms](#)
 - [If they have recently had a close contact with a person with COVID-19](#)

*Consider modifications to provide clients who need to stay home because they are sick, recently had close contact with a person who is sick, or are at higher risk with food. Modifications could include providing delivery to these clients, if feasible/affordable, or allowing clients to designate other people who live outside of their home who can pick up food and deliver it to their home.

Plan for what to do if an employee, volunteer, or client who comes onsite becomes sick by referring to relevant sections in [CDC’s Considerations for Community-Based Organizations](#).

Volunteer and Employee Safety

- Train staff and volunteers on new procedures. If possible, conduct training virtually so all can attend without gathering together.
 - Place signs and visual reminders about prevention steps around work areas, including markers for keeping at least 6 feet apart.
- Require staff and volunteers to wash their hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water before, frequently during, and after shifts. Use hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol if soap and water aren’t available.
- Provide a handwashing break every 2 hours and allow staff and volunteers to wash their hands more frequently if they choose.
- Provide staff and volunteers disposable gloves since they may be exchanging or handling products from other people, unclean produce, or sharp edges on product packages.
 - Remind staff and volunteers to avoid touching their face while wearing gloves and to wash their hands before putting gloves on and after taking them off.
- Require staff and volunteers to wear masks, unless they have trouble breathing or are otherwise unable to remove a mask without assistance.
 - Provide information to all staff and volunteers on [proper use](#) and [washing of masks](#).
 - Employers should bring extra masks each day in case masks get wet or soiled and a sealable plastic bag to store used masks.
- Provide options, as possible, for employees and volunteers to work remotely, especially if they are at [higher risk](#) of severe illness from COVID-19. Tasks that might be done remotely include contacting clients over the phone for assessments and scheduling and working virtually with suppliers and donors.
- Limit the number of staff, volunteers, and clients at assigned times so that at least 6 feet of distance can be maintained between people.

Client Outreach

- Raise awareness about the opportunities for food distribution. Some people who have not needed assistance before, may need it now because of changes caused by the pandemic.
- Invite existing clients to share information if their needs have changed. Some clients may need additional food supplementation at this time.
- Tell clients about any changes in how, when, or where you are distributing food. Use simple signage and resources in multiple languages and encourage word of mouth and social media outreach, if possible and applicable.
- Consider doing intake over the phone when possible.
- Share print materials about COVID-19 prevention at the facility or in bags or boxes provided to clients. Select CDC materials include: [How to Protect Yourself and Others](#)  [290 KB, 2 pages], [Help Protect Yourself and Others in Public Settings](#)  [572 KB, 1 page], [Stop the Spread of Germs](#)  [468 KB, 1 page], and [Symptoms of Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)  [465 KB, 1 page]. The [full list of CDC print materials](#) is frequently updated and provides resources in other languages.

Food insecurity, even in the short-term, can have serious impacts on physical and mental health. During this difficult time, food pantry and food distribution sites are critical. Managers can provide safe and flexible options to help people with food insecurity while prioritizing the health and safety of clients, staff, and volunteers.

More Information

- [Food and COVID-19](#)
- [Food and Food System Resources During COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

Considerations for Outdoor Farmers Markets

Considerations for Outdoor Learning Gardens and Community Gardens

For more information on COVID-19 and food, see FAQ pages from the [S. Food and Drug Administration](#) and the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#)

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