Discussion on how to ensure and maintain food supply and how to protect workers in the food industry in the context of the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic.

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<th>6/04/2020</th>
<th>Summary of participants</th>
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<td>EPI-WIN COVID-19 webinar: Protecting workers in the food industry</td>
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| Number of participants | 415 |
| Number of WHO Regions represented | 6 (out of 6) |
| Number of countries represented | 49 |

On 6 April 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) hosted an EPI-WIN COVID-19 webinar on the theme “how to ensure and maintain food supply and how to protect workers in the food industry and at retail” in the context of the ongoing global Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Participants represented a broad spectrum of organizations, including specialized United Nations agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, national food safety agencies and other public bodies, universities, and food producers, processors, distributors and retailers.

The meeting was facilitated by the WHO, with presentations by Dr Peter Ben Embarek, Food Safety Expert and Unit Head at WHO, and Professor Alan Reilly of the University College Dublin (UCD), who currently serves as a member of the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) advisory board and Former Chief Executive Officer of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland. Webinar participants were then invited to pose questions to the presenters.

Dr Embarek gave a brief update on COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in a total of 62,955 deaths in 148 countries and territories since 31 December 2019. During the previous day (5 April) there were a reported 80,692 cases from 146 countries, with the majority occurring in the United States, Spain and Germany, and 5,749 deaths in 79 countries. All genetic samples of the SARS-CoV-2 isolated from humans
show very high genetic similarity; this confirms that the virus was very likely to have been transmitted to humans via a single point introduction from a single animal.

The early clustering of cases around a live animal market suggests that the market itself may either have been a source of animal-to-human transmission or played a role in amplifying initial spread. This evidence highlights the key importance of sanitary control measures in places of food distribution and retail, as they are a critical control point for preventing transmission of food-borne and infectious diseases.

Food producers, processors, distributors and retailers also have a critical contribution to make to the containment of the current COVID-19 pandemic not just in terms of preventing transmission, but also securing food supplies which are essential to maintaining social stability while pandemic control measures such as “lockdowns” are in place—particularly in regions facing food insecurity. The food industry is also inherently susceptible to disruption during pandemics, as many operations involve labour-intensive tasks which must be carried out in a specific location.

In recognition of these challenges, the WHO is developing a guidance document for businesses involved in the food supply chain\(^1\), including measures to protect workers against exposure to the virus, strengthen existing food hygiene and sanitation measures, adapt personnel management practices while social distancing measures are in place, and maintain integrity of the food supply chain. It is hoped that the use of this guidance would not only contribute to protection of food supply chain operations, but also contribute to the containment of the pandemic.

A number of issues were raised during the question and answer session:

- Standard protocols for reporting illness among workers should be established, along with criteria to determine workers’ fitness to work.
- Priority should be placed on minimization of the risk of transmission of the virus in the workplace, with measures to put in place social distancing, disinfect of high-risk surfaces on a routine basis, and ensure hand hygiene.
- Commercially-available disinfectants such as ethanol solutions (of at least 70% concentration) and chlorine bleach are proven to be effective and reliable methods of disinfection, are appropriate for a wide range of situations, and pose only a minor risk to human health. Ozone air treatment is currently not recommended for disinfection to control transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Ammonia is not recommended as a disinfectant due to its corrosive properties and potential harms to workers’ health.
- Use of personal protective equipment (PPE) is recommended in particular where social distancing measures are not possible in environments where food processing or preparation
takes place, for example due to space constraints. It is essential that PPE is replaced frequently and used appropriately to ensure its effectiveness.

- Physical distancing measures should also be enforced in food distribution and retail. For example, workers involved in food transport and delivery should remain in vehicles wherever possible and use hand sanitizer when handling documents. In retail environments, customer numbers should be regulated, physical protective barriers installed at cash registers, shopping trolleys regularly sanitized, and floor markings placed to encourage physical distancing.

- Washing vegetables with water is effective for removing surface contamination, including the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Food producers, processors, distributors and retailers, in addition to members of the public, are encouraged to follow the guidance set out in the WHO’s *Five Keys To Safer Food* manual².

- Transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus from food packaging materials is unlikely; industries involved in the food supply chain should therefore focus their attention on disinfection of high-risk surfaces in the workplace to protect workers.

- While the optimum temperature for survival of the SARS-CoV-2 virus on surfaces has yet to be determined conclusively, it is known that other coronaviruses can persist for long periods on frozen surfaces and are not deactivated by low temperatures.

- Transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus through drinking water has not been recorded to date, and sanitary measures to reduce transmission should focus on disinfection of high-risk surfaces.

- Routine employee temperature monitoring is not currently recommended in food processing operations, as it is likely to be costly and time consuming relative to the expected benefit.

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https://www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/5keysmanual/en/.