

Health Expert Statement Addressing Safety of Reusables and COVID-19

Reuse and refill systems are an essential part of addressing the plastic pollution crisis and moving away from a fossil fuel-based economy. They can create jobs and help build local economies. The COVID-19 global pandemic has triggered a discussion of how to ensure the safety of reusable systems in a public health crisis. Based on the best available science and guidance from public health professionals, **it is clear that reusable systems can be used safely by employing basic hygiene.** Below are the key facts to keep in mind.

Available Evidence Indicates that the Virus Spreads Primarily from Inhaling Aerosolized Droplets, Rather than through Contact with Surfaces

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person...between people who are in close contact with one another, through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks¹.” While “it may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes,” aerosolized droplets are the only documented method of COVID-19 transmission to date.²

Disposable Products Present Similar Issues As Reusable Ones

Studies show that the COVID-19 virus can remain infectious on surfaces for varying times depending on the material. One study showed infectious virus lasted up to 24 hours on paper and cardboard and between 2-3 days on plastic and stainless steel^{3,4}. In another study, infectious virus was not found on print or tissue paper after just three hours, whereas it was active up to 1 day on cloth, up to 3 days on glass, and 6 days on plastic and stainless steel.⁵ To prevent transmission through objects and surfaces, one can assume that any object or surface in a public space — reusable or disposable — could be contaminated with the virus. Single-use plastic is not inherently safer than reusables, and causes additional public health concerns once it is discarded.

Reusable Products are Easily Cleaned

Most common approved household disinfectants⁶ should be effective for disinfecting hard surfaces, including reusable items, with such surfaces being cleaned thoroughly using a detergent or soap and hot water prior to disinfection if they are visibly dirty. Dishwashers and washing machines should be effective if operated according to manufacturers' instructions and, in the case of laundry, using the warmest appropriate water setting for the items and drying

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html>

² [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cleaning-](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cleaning-disinfection.html)

[disinfection.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cleaning-disinfection.html) ³ <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2004973>

⁴ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247\(20\)30003-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247(20)30003-3/fulltext)

⁵ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247\(20\)30003-](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247(20)30003-3/fulltext#coronavirus-linkbac)

[3/fulltext#coronavirus-linkbac](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247(20)30003-3/fulltext#coronavirus-linkbac)

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⁶ <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>

items completely. Similarly, washing hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub, and then avoiding touching your eyes, mouth, or nose are effective ways to protect yourself.^{7,8}

Best Practices for Reusable Products in the Retail Space

#1. Comply with food safety/ health codes. Within retail and foodservice, reusable plates, cutlery, cups, and napkins are governed by strict state food safety procedures outlined in health codes. Ware-washing at high temperatures with additional sanitizing procedures are standard in the industry and provide more than adequate protection against virus transmission.

#2. Use additional hygienic practices for COVID. The bottom line is that reusable items are safe to use when cleaned with soap and water, and there is no substitute for thorough hygiene. Retail food establishments should follow Food and Drug Administration guidance regarding retail practices and COVID-19 safety.⁹

#3. Employ contact-free systems for customers' personal bags and cups. Systems in which there is no contact between the customer's reusable cup, container or bag and retail surface areas can protect workers and provide a precautionary approach to addressing COVID-19 transmission. For example, California's Occupational Safety and Health Administration recommends that "when customers bring their own bags, employees should be instructed to:

- Not touch or place groceries in customer brought bags.
- Ask customers to leave their own bags in the shopping cart.
- Ask customers to bag their own groceries.¹⁰

#4. Ensure that workers are protected. In addition to investing in safe and accessible reusable systems, other steps retailers can take to protect workers include providing PPE, paid sick leave, reduced occupancy in stores, and requiring customers to wear masks and practice social distancing. Customers should handle their own reusable items when going to shops and stores.

⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cleaning-disinfection.html> ⁸ [https://www.journalofhospitalinfection.com/article/S0195-6701\(20\)30046-3/fulltext](https://www.journalofhospitalinfection.com/article/S0195-6701(20)30046-3/fulltext)

⁹

<https://www.fda.gov/food/food-safety-during-emergencies/best-practices-retail-food-stores-restaurants-and-food-pick-up-delivery-services-during-covid-19>

¹⁰ <https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/Coronavirus/COVID-19-Infection-Prevention-in-Grocery-Stores.pdf>

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