

# Best Practices for Controlling COVID-19 in Small Business Meat Processors in Nebraska

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There is no evidence that COVID-19 is transmitted through food consumption, including meat. In general, respiratory illnesses are not transmitted via food or food packaging.

However, with the increasing illnesses of COVID-19 in Nebraska, plants should consider implementing “Best Practices” to avoid transmission from one employee to another. A prevention program should be built around reducing exposure of your employees to the transmission of the virus.

## Action Steps

1. Your workers need to be aware of COVID-19 symptoms. The CDC has signage and videos on their web site.
  - a. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>
2. Request that your employees report illness to the manager and then exclude employees from the workplace if they have symptoms of COVID-19.
3. Conduct a wellness check each day. Ask if employees have a fever and consider taking a temperature of each employee.
4. Continue to reinforce these above practices to your workers and provide all employees with refresher training on food hygiene principles and practices.
5. Minimize the risk of transmission by implementing the following practices.

\*Implementation of some practices may not be easy in meat processing workplace environments.

## Implementation Practices to Reduce Risk

### *Have workers wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)*

1. Wear face masks.
  - a. If you cannot obtain disposable medical masks, use a cotton cloth mask. Launder the face masks in hot water (155 degrees F) and machine dry.
  - b. Cotton cloth needs to be changed frequently (no standard definition, but at least once or twice each day).
2. Wear disposal gloves.
  - a. Maintain hand washing procedures, even when wearing gloves.
  - b. Change gloves frequently.
  - c. Avoid touching mouth and eyes when wearing gloves.
3. Wear frocks, hairnets, and protective head gear.
  - a. Clean and laundered clothing is not considered a transfer vector for COVID-19.

### *Establish spacing of employees in the work area and break rooms.*

1. The recommendation from CDC is 6 feet apart.
2. World Health Organization says 1 meter (3.4 feet) for work environment.
3. Consider separate duties to improve employee spacing in your processing facility. One example is to designate a processing area or a room for a fewer number of employees.
4. Consider staggering workstations so employees do not face each other.
5. If possible, consider split shifts to reduce the number

of employees in the plant at one time. Also, sanitize touch points between shifts.

6. If employees need to work close to each other, then face masks and face shields should be considered.

*Wash hands, even if using gloves.*

Follow the guidelines from CDC

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/hygiene/hand/handwashing.html>

Wash hands:

1. Before, during, and after preparing food.
2. Before and after treating a cut or wound.
3. After using the toilet.
4. After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
5. After touching an animal or animal waste.
6. After touching garbage.
7. After removing items dropped on the processing floor.
8. After touching common touch points used by customers (for example: sales counters, grocery baskets or carts, refrigeration doors, door handles, etc.).

*Handling customer sales and purchases.*

1. Keep customers out of the processing area. Post signs at entrances to retail and processing areas informing customers of access procedures.
2. If customers are allowed in a retail area, minimize the number of customers in your operation at one time to ensure adequate spacing. Require customers that are not feeling well or have traveled to locations with high infection rates to contact you by phone to make delivery arrangements.
3. If you deliver products to customers practice the following.
  - a. Notify your customers to place orders in advance and deliver the orders at curbside or the front door.
  - b. Maintain spacing as described above with the customer.
  - c. Do not shake hands.
  - d. Employees should wear a mask and gloves for delivery of orders to customers.
4. Frequently sanitize the touch points in the retail area where customers or other employees will touch the same surface.
  - a. Use sanitizer at the strength recommended by the manufacturer.
  - b. Most sanitizers used in food production should be effective. C for effectiveness at this web site: <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>

*For employees that eat in your facility.*

1. Practice handwashing before and after eating.
2. Practice sanitation of common touch point surfaces.
  - a. Lunch table and chairs.
  - b. Microwave ovens.
  - c. Counters.
  - d. Refrigerator handles.
  - e. Sinks and faucet handles.
  - f. Door handles.
  - g. Telephones.
3. Practice personal spacing described above.

*Standard cleaning and sanitation.*

1. Use normal daily cleaning and sanitation procedures for the production areas in your facility.
2. Increase the frequency of cleaning and sanitation for touch areas either in the production area or outside of the production area in your facility.
  - a. Common tools like brooms, squeegees, scrapers, or hand tools should be sanitized after each use, especially between two separate users.
  - b. Less common touch area includes doorknobs, light switches, handles, desk, phones, keyboards and more.
3. The virus is not more resistant than the bacteria you are trying to control with sanitation. Use the EPA website above to double check effectiveness of the sanitizer you normally use.

*If an employee becomes sick and tests positive for COVID-19 or has symptoms associated with COVID-19, take the following steps.*

1. If the employee is at work when COVID-19 symptoms occur, send the employee home.
2. If the employee is at home, do not allow employee to return to work until they are in compliance with return-to-work policies, preferably in line with CDC guidance.
3. Develop a return to work policy. A good example is: Employees may return to work only when they have been fever-free for at least 72 hours (without the use of fever-reducing medication) AND other symptoms have improved AND at least 7 days have passed since symptoms first appeared if no testing occurred OR if employee was tested, they have been fever-free for at least 72 hours (without the use of fever-reducing medication) AND other symptoms have improved AND have received two negative tests in a row, 24 hours apart.
4. If an employee reports the illness at work, then clean and sanitize all work touch points in the employee

work area. In addition, consider shutting down processing operations for additional cleaning and sanitation of all areas in the facility using the standard cleaning and sanitation described above.

5. If you can isolate the work area for each employee, then clean and sanitize that area and you may be able to continue operations.
6. Remember, many infected people show no symptoms but still shed COVID-19. In addition infected individuals will shed COVID-19 before symptoms appear.
7. Inform appropriate government authorities.
  - a. County Health Departments and your local food inspector.
  - b. Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services or the appropriate agency for your state.
  - c. Nebraska Department of Agriculture, Food Safety & Consumer Protection or the appropriate agency for your state.
  - d. USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service.

Most of this information was gathered from a webinar conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO). “EPI-WIN COVID-19: How to Ensure and Maintain Food Supply and How to Protect Workers in the Food Industry and at Retail” Dr. Peter Ben Embarek, Food Safety Expert and WHO Unit Head, and Professor Alan Riley, University College of Dublin and former CEO of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland. April 3, 2020.

The WHO has interim guidance on COVID-19 and food safety for food business at: [https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331705/WHO-2019-nCoV-Food\\_Safety-2020.1-eng.pdf](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331705/WHO-2019-nCoV-Food_Safety-2020.1-eng.pdf).

In addition information from the North American Meat Institute (NAMI) was reviewed and information adapted for smaller business meat and poultry processing businesses. (Food Industry Recommended Protocols When Employee/Customer Tests Positive for COVID- 19)

<https://www.meatinstitute.org/index.php?ht=d/sp/i/164447/pid/164447>)

This is an abbreviated list of suggestions for “Best Practices”. If the Federal government or your State implements requirements that exceed these guidelines, then use their recommendations for your facility with employees and customers.

Operations at several Meat Processing Plants have been affected by employee illnesses from COVID-19, and many have shut down to make additional corrections. In the Midwest states, reporting of increased illness and death is occurring. Predictions also indicate the peak of illnesses and deaths will occur at a later date in the Midwest than in other locations in the United States.