



EU Social Partners EFFAT and FoodDrinkEurope

Guidelines to protect the health and safety of workers in food business during the COVID-19 pandemic

The production and distribution of food and drink products is essential at all time; during this exceptional COVID-19 pandemic, this does not change, and the protection of the health and safety of workers in the food industry must be a priority.

Every business, whatever its size, is encouraged to set up a crisis taskforce and to establish a contingency/continuity plan to ensure the protection of its personnel and the maintenance of its activities. EFFAT and FoodDrinkEurope agree that Social Dialogue as well as the involvement of health and safety representatives should be promoted even more during this emergency time.

EFFAT and FoodDrinkEurope have come together, as recognised EU Social Partners in the food manufacturing sector, to agree on these Guidelines which have been developed to support their members in dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak.

EFFAT and FoodDrinkEurope encourage their members to jointly discuss and promote these guidelines at company level.

The aim of this joint document is to identify minimum standards to be applied in food businesses during this period of emergency. The adoption of even more effective and tailored measures is of course encouraged. These Guidelines cannot be used to lower the level of health protection already applicable as a consequence of the measures established by the authorities in each country or agreed at national sectoral and/or at company level to deal with the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak.

1. Hygiene guidance for food businesses related to COVID-19

General principles

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has confirmed that there is no evidence that food is a vector for transmission of COVID-19. However, as is the case for all potentially infectious agents, preventative actions, including Good Hygiene and Manufacturing Practices (GHP, GMP) and the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles, are essential in the contribution to food safety. Good hygiene practices, including appropriate sanitation measures, must be in place to reduce exposure to, and transmission of, a range of illnesses. This includes both exposure amongst employees at company sites, and the potential exposure of foodstuffs on the production lines.

Information to employees

Communication is crucial in this current emergency context.

- Employers should ensure that staff are aware of the COVID-19 outbreak situation and related risks and of the advice being given by the national authorities in relation to symptoms, behavioral rules, social distancing, restricted movement, self-isolation and travel, in order to help slow the spread of coronavirus.
- Employers should remind everyone accessing the company facilities of the government's public health advice. Posters, leaflets and other materials can be downloaded on national authority websites.

- Information related to specific precautionary measures to be observed in the company facilities must be made available for everyone and displayed on notice boards as well as in other areas of the company facilities (e.g. production, warehouse, logistic centres, offices). The information must be published in the local languages and other languages as required to ensure appropriate dissemination.
- Specific information sessions (in person, through digital means or information brochures) to familiarize workers with the new precautionary measures and the possible changes in the work organization, should be provided to all employees accessing the company facilities.
- In addition, Food Business Operators (FBOs) must remember that they have particular responsibilities under food law and must maintain proper hygiene practices at all times.

Hygiene practices

Employers should:

- stress the importance of more frequent handwashing and disinfection, according to local authority requirements and provide the correct and sufficient number of sanitary facilities e.g. hand washing and toilet facilities, to enable staff to practice good hygiene.
- ensure that sufficient time is available to wash hands with soap or disinfectant gel.
- ensure that objects, working tools and surfaces that are touched regularly are frequently cleaned and disinfected using standard cleaning products. This includes but is not restricted to, forklifts, workbenches, door handles, handrails, keyboards, mouse devices, screens, lockers.
- increase the frequency and the intensity of cleaning and disinfection of all areas including production, warehouse, logistics, offices as well as all handling areas, control rooms, toilets, dressing rooms, canteens, reception desks, etc.
- ensure effective supervision of staff to reinforce hygienic practices.
- ensure appropriate processes are put in place for staff to report concerns over hygiene or social distancing measures and have these concerns acted upon.

2. Review of work organisation

Due to the current emergency situation:

- Social distancing must be implemented in all areas of the facility, ensuring a two-meter (six feet) physical distance between workers wherever possible and at least a one-meter (three feet) distance at all times. Measures should also be taken to ensure social distancing is respected when entering or leaving the company facilities.
- Production and logistics should be organized to reduce the spread of the virus as much as possible; shift or staggered work hours are favoured and should be organised in a way that prevent meetings and gatherings amongst workers during shift changes. These changes in the work organization should facilitate a thorough cleaning on a more regular basis.
- In line with national measures, EFFAT and FoodDrinkEurope agree that social distancing is the best measure to prevent infection. In case social distancing cannot be guaranteed, EFFAT and FoodDrinkEurope agree that masks, ensuring effective protection, must be used. In this situation, changes to the design of the workstations such as the installation of Perspex or Plexiglas or similar materials, to shield workers from potentially infecting each other are also a possibility. The use of masks will in any case apply in full respect of the ordinances of regional and national authorities. Should WHO advice change, this recommendation will be appropriately adapted.
- The closure of all departments other than production, logistics and distribution is encouraged. In departments where it is possible to work from home, this should be the rule.
- Access to the different parts of the factory should ensure, as much as possible, limiting contacts and gatherings of staff.

- Canteen services can be continued only if social distancing can be ensured, e.g. the arrangement of tables can be changed to ensure that the distance between employees is maintained, according to national requirements. Food should be served on individual plates provided by the canteen staff who should be protected with gloves and protected with Perspex, Plexiglas or similar materials if 1 metre distance cannot be respected. If needed, lunch and rest breaks should be spaced out to maintain social distancing.
- All contractors and other necessary auxiliary workers (e.g. pest contractors) must be made aware of the need to self-report or inform of contacts with infected cases before entering facilities.

3. Management of employee sickness

Employees and contractors should immediately declare to the personnel office any physical symptoms (fever, respiratory infections such as a cough and shortness of breath), before commencing work or during working time. Employees and contractors should declare if they have had recent contact with a person who has become infected. Employers should remain vigilant and ensure that all staff are encouraged to report symptoms and those showing symptoms are properly assessed.

Measurement of employee temperature at the entrance to the workplace can be requested and is anyway encouraged.

For an individual who has strong symptoms associated with COVID-19 or is diagnosed with COVID-19:

- If the employee is onsite at the facility, the employer should send the employee home immediately or to an appropriate medical facility as appropriate.
- If the employee is at home, he should not be allowed to come to work.
- The potentially exposed individuals should be identified, e.g. those who were in close contact with the infected individual as provided in WHO Guidance.

If an employee has been in close contact with a COVID-19 patient, but without testing positive for COVID-19:

- The employee should not come to work. In addition to the normal practices that are established to manage illness amongst employees, national authority recommendations on self-isolation and medical consultation should be followed for any employee suspected (and their close contacts) of being positive for COVID-19.
- Food businesses should follow protocols set by their responsible health departments, which may vary depending on the community spread of COVID-19 in a given area. As food is not known to be a vector of transmission, these decisions will be based on a public health risk of person-to-person transmission and not based on food safety.
- Extra measures should be foreseen for workers who are over 65 years old or who have reported health issues such as heart disease, or respiratory illness, or who have lowered immunity, as these workers are most at risk of becoming critically ill from contracting COVID-19. These measures should be aligned with national authority recommendations. Extra measures should also be foreseen for pregnant workers.
- All precautionary measures listed in these guidelines should apply to all workers accessing the company facilities including temporary workers, seasonal workers and posted workers. Where the employer directly or indirectly provides accommodation for posted and seasonal workers, housing facilities should be of a size that allows for a decent living and recommended social distancing among the occupants. All rooms should be cleaned on a daily basis.
- Suspected or diagnosed cases of COVID-19 infections of workers employed by third companies, temporary agency workers, seasonal workers and posted workers should be treated in the same way as for employees directly employed by the company. The employer should control that this is the case also when it comes to workers operating in the company facilities but employed by third parties (e.g. external contractor, temporary agency or in the framework of the provision of services).

All measures taken should be effective in protecting workers health and in-line with authority requirements, proportional to the risk and not prevent the continuity of food production.

4. Transport

Employers should ensure that drivers and suppliers also respect strict sanitary rules.

If possible, truck drivers should remain on board of their vehicles; access to the offices is not permitted. Truck drivers should be allowed to access dedicated sanitary facilities external to the offices.

5. Travel to and from work

Where possible, the employer is encouraged to facilitate arrangements for safe travel to minimize risk of infection and to ensure safety. Where the transport service is organised by the company, it should guarantee social distancing of workers during the trip.

6. Dissemination and validity of the proposed measures

EFFAT and FoodDrinkEurope will disseminate and promote these guidelines among their respective members, taking into account national practices.

EFFAT and FoodDrinkEurope will jointly request the European Commission to support in the dissemination of these Guidelines.

These Guidelines will be in force for the duration of the COVID-19 health emergency as defined by the relevant authorities. During this period, dialogue between social partners at European, national sectorial, local and company levels should be further strengthened, with a view to achieving a coherent and coordinated approach to the different problems that arise.

7. Monitoring and follow-up

The signatory Social partners will:

- Jointly assess the implementation of these guidelines during and at the end of the COVID-19 health emergency.
- When preparing the next social dialogue work programme, the social partners will take account of these guidelines.