

Buying and Storing Groceries during the Coronavirus Pandemic

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In a nutshell...

This article provides practical suggestions on how consumers can help reduce their risk of contracting COVID-19 while purchasing, handling, and storing groceries during the current pandemic.

Groceries are always a necessity, and normally it is no problem to select and purchase what we like. The current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, however, has turned the tables on shopping for, handling, and storing groceries. One challenge is how to maintain “social distancing” while buying what we need to feed our families. To compound matters, we are also concerned that in addition to bringing home the staples, we could be exposing ourselves and our loved ones to the COVID-19 virus as we venture out of our homes.

We offer you the practical suggestions below for buying, handling, and storing the food products you need during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the Grocery Store

First, if at all possible, *stay out of grocery stores*, especially if you are elderly or have an underlying medical condition that makes you vulnerable to respiratory infection. Don't go to the store if you have symptoms of COVID-19, including fever or cough. If you can, order groceries online, which includes having them delivered to your home or in some cases, made available for curbside pickup at the grocery store. Both are contactless ways to get your groceries.

If you must go to the grocery store, try to plan your trip for when it is not crowded to help keep an adequate social distance from others (at least six feet). Cover your mouth and nose with a secure mask or bandana. (Make sure your mask is tight enough to remain in place with little to no adjustment while you are shopping; you can practice this at home.) Gloves may be helpful if by wearing them they are a reminder not to touch your face. But remember, that the virus could adhere to your gloves and you can still transfer viruses to your face or other surfaces through a gloved hand.

If you have sanitizing wipes, bring them with you to wipe down your shopping cart or basket. Avoid touching your face, eyes and nose as you shop. An electronic checkout may be your best bet for social distancing. If you have enough disinfecting wipes, or if they are made available at the checkout, use one on the screen before you touch it. Use hand sanitizer after going through the checkout (and if you have a good supply of hand sanitizer, use it frequently while shopping).

If you drove to the store, load your groceries into the trunk of your car. Use hand sanitizer before you open the driver's door. That will help prevent you potentially contaminating your car handle and interior.



While grocery shopping, it is easier to maintain a six-foot distance from others if you are shopping alone and at a time when there are fewer people in the store. Some stores have special early hours for elderly shoppers.

Unloading Groceries

Once back in your home, place your grocery bags on a pre-determined surface that will be your “unloading zone.” First address frozen and cold foods that are sealed in plastic and wipe them down with disinfecting wipes or run them under cold¹, soapy water, dry with a paper towel, and place them in the freezer or refrigerator as appropriate. Throughout this process, don’t touch the freezer, refrigerator, or cabinet handles before first washing your hands. Remember not to touch your face or clothing during this process unless you have just washed your hands.

Fresh produce can be washed under cold running water without soap. Cardboard-boxed foods, such as cereals and pasta that do not require refrigeration or freezing, can be wiped down with disinfecting wipes or left in the “unloading zone” for 24 hours² before putting those items away into cupboards. If those foods are needed immediately, take them out of their cardboard packaging and carefully remove the contents into a clean container without touching the food or the container. Discard the original cardboard box and wash your hands. Cardboard-boxed frozen foods, such as frozen pizzas, should also be removed from their boxes and put into the freezer in their plastic packaging. Always wash your hands after touching the cardboard packaging. If you need cooking directions from cardboard-boxed food items, before discarding the cardboard, arrange these packages with cooking directions facing up. Wash your hands, and take photos of these directions before discarding the boxes.

When you are finished unpacking and addressing each purchased item, discard your grocery bags or save them in a designated place for later recycling. After that, wash your hands. When your “unloading zone” is free of items, clean and then disinfect it with disinfecting wipes or a solution made by adding ½ cup of chlorine bleach to one gallon of water (see this free, downloadable surface COVID-19 [disinfection poster](#) with simple directions). If you have no other products, use a hot, soapy water solution. Don’t forget all the surfaces you touched on your way into your home, including door handles, light switches, and keys. And remember, avoid touching your face through all of the steps of the shopping process.

Obtaining, toting, and storing groceries has become more laborious and time-consuming in these months of pandemic. We trust these suggestions will help you reduce your family’s risk of contracting COVID-19 as you secure their nutrition. Meanwhile, and perhaps for future planning, we remind readers that [Dr. Ralph’s Emergency Preparedness Closet](#) offers a free check-list of the items you will need to help stay healthy and secure during a shelter-in-place emergency such as a pandemic.

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¹ Use cold soapy water to wash sealed foods as warm water could contribute to food spoilage.

² It is thought that the COVID-19 does not survive on cardboard surfaces for over 24 hours. See, for example, this study: [New coronavirus stable for hours on surfaces.](#)