COVID-19 FAQ

Concern around the COVID-19 pandemic has led to many questions about foodservice packaging and its safety. The information below represents some of the most frequently asked questions about takeout packaging and COVID-19. While this information is subject to changing data, it should also be noted that public health officials and every state are dealing with the outbreak in different ways. If you have a question that is specific to your locality, we recommend consulting with your local public health officials or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Are foodservice packaging materials safe?

Foodservice packaging was originally created to protect public health and provide a safe and sanitary way for consumers to enjoy foods and beverages on-the-go. Food packaging materials — including paper, plastic, metals, glass and ceramics — are thoroughly tested by the appropriate regulatory agencies. Food packaging materials are evaluated by agencies, such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and Health Canada, to ensure materials meet stringent safety standards.

Takeout packaging provides a safe and sanitary way for foodservice providers to serve food. When used only once, it reduces the spread of infectious disease by providing a measure of protection from repeated personal contact.

Multiple studies conducted at foodservice operations by health departments prove that single-use packaging is safer and more sanitary than reusable packaging. Reusable foodservice packaging had "higher microbiological levels than disposable items" and "higher than acceptable bacterial counts." The FDA's Food Code spells out the sanitary and health benefits of single-use foodservice items and mandates their use in certain circumstances to ensure the public's safety.

Is reusable foodservice packaging better or safer than single-use packaging?

Properly stored and handled, takeout packaging aids public health and minimizes the opportunity for food contamination. Foodservice packaging is manufactured, packed and shipped so it arrives clean at foodservice establishments. This means that operators have control over the packaging and know that it's sanitary due to its limited exposure and touch points — helping to keep food safe and consumers healthy. However, reusables that are left in the hands of

the consumer, i.e., items that people may bring from home, take sanitation control out of the hands of an operator, making it less likely that they are properly sanitized. If the reusable item originated at a foodservice establishment, once returned they must be properly washed, sanitized and stored.

During the current COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing, many foodservice establishments are closed or have limited occupancy to dine-in patrons and are relying on takeout and delivery options. Using only reusable packaging would make it difficult, or impossible in most cases, for many of these establishments to continue serving their customers. Innovations, such as tamper-evident packaging, also provide a measure of safety to consumers by ensuring that food is only handled in the clean environment in which it was packaged.

Why are businesses that previously encouraged bringing your own reusable cup or container now relying on single-use options?

In an effort to help control the spread of COVID-19, many establishments have eliminated the use of personal reusable cups and containers to minimize the risk of transmitting the virus between staff and customers, and vice-versa.

While many people are diligent about properly cleaning their reusable cups and containers, they are not usually taking those items directly from their dishwasher to their favorite foodservice establishment. Those items travel from a consumer's home to the foodservice establishment with many opportunities for contamination along the way.

During this time when many foodservice operations are limiting their use of reusable cups and containers, single-use options enable them to continue serving their customers in a safe and sanitary way.

Will increased use of takeout containers have a negative impact on the environment?

The foodservice packaging industry has been and will remain committed to the recovery of takeout packaging. According to the latest available data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, paper and plastic single-use foodservice packaging items make up less than 2 percent of discards from municipal solid waste. Despite this small footprint, the industry will continue to work to reduce the impact of its products on the environment and to ensure takeout packaging is recycled or composted.

With more restaurants moving to takeout and delivery, how can I be sure that my food is safe during transport?

As the demand for food and beverages on-the-go remains prevalent, safety continues to be important. Packaging has been designed to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold so consumers can enjoy their food and beverages as they're intended, without sacrificing quality. The package protects the food inside once in transport. Many companies are now using tamper-evident

packaging (consumer "rip strip" containers, stickers to seal bags, etc.), which offers different ways to seal and protect the items inside.

Does the convenience of foodservice packaging matter during the COVID-19 pandemic?

While foodservice packaging is often seen as an item of convenience, allowing people to enjoy foods and beverages on-the-go, during the COVID-19 pandemic it's more than a convenience — it's a critical component to safely delivering food to consumers. Regardless of what's going on in the world, people still need to eat and drink to survive and some people are not able to prepare food in their homes. Furthermore, a meal served from a favorite restaurant can serve as a comfort in these trying times. Takeout packaging allows people to continue ordering food from their favorite foodservice establishment when they might not be allowed to dine-in. It also provides a way for meals to be delivered to medically compromised patients or senior citizens who are home-bound. It means healthcare workers on the front lines can grab a meal or a cup of coffee and enjoy it on-the-go. It allows food to be served to students who rely on school-provided meals, even while they are not able to attend school in person. It allows foodservice establishments that would otherwise be closed at this time to continue to operate, helping to not only feed their communities, but provide jobs for their employees and contribute to the economy.

Do I need to worry that I'll get COVID-19 from my takeout containers and cups? Could they be considered public biohazards?

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, there is no evidence of food or food packaging being associated with transmission of COVID-19. And, as August 22, 2020, the CDC reports that there have been no cases of COVID-19 being identified where infection was thought to have occurred by touching food packaging.

Single-use takeout containers and cups are not biohazards. Although items, like cups, straws and utensils, can come into contact with bodily fluids, they should be properly disposed in trash receptacles or recycled/composted, where available.

The biggest source of contamination is not food or the packaging containing food, but people. Following your state or local guidelines for social distancing and wearing masks remains the best way to avoid the virus.

If foodservice packaging is supposed to be safe and sanitary, how can we be sure that it hasn't been infected at some point in the supply chain? Is the industry taking steps to ensure its products are sanitary?

The foodservice packaging industry is committed to ensuring its products continue to serve and package food in a safe and sanitary manner. This includes following guidelines set forth by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and state/local public health departments. When taking proper precautions, there is no risk of a

worker in the supply chain contaminating the packaging they are manufacturing or distributing, particularly considering how long the virus can remain viable.

According to OSHA, workers and workplaces in the foodservice supply chain are considered low to medium risk for exposure to the COVID-19 virus. Employers within this supply chain are encouraged to take administrative actions that would continue to mitigate the spread of the virus. These measures include staying informed on the latest information from public health officials, encouraging sick employees or employees with sick family members to stay at home, considering sick leave policies that are consistent with public health guidance, implementing flexible worksites and workhours to limit the number of workers present at any time, developing policies and procedures that promote good hygiene, and creating policies for when workers do experience symptoms.

Is it safe to recycle or compost foodservice packaging during the COVID-19 pandemic?
During the current pandemic, it's safe to recycle foodservice packaging and also very important. The materials put out for collection are turned into products, such as cardboard boxes, tissues and paper towels, are products that are needed more than ever. People should continue to recycle or compost their foodservice packaging products as they usually do, by placing them in the proper receptacles so sanitation workers are not directly handling these products. Waste collection is considered an essential business and many providers are taking extra safety precautions in order to continue servicing their customers. It's always important to prevent littering and ensure foodservice packaging products are disposed of in their proper receptacles for trash, recycling or composting.

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