Food Safety and Coronavirus

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses which may cause illness in animals or humans. In humans, several coronaviruses are known to cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The most recently discovered coronavirus causes coronavirus disease COVID-19.

On March 12, 2020, Trinidad and Tobago confirmed its first Covid-19 Case. With the realization that the country had recorded its first Covid-19 case, panic buying ensued and citizens stocked up on large quantities of several commodities such as toilet paper and disinfectant sprays, with the sudden fear of a forthcoming shortage or an increase in prices. Supermarket shelves, locally, regionally and internationally struggled to remain stocked on commodities, as long lines presented themselves at these establishments. Consumers also rushed to the country’s Farmers Markets and Municipal Markets, to purchase fresh produce and meat.

Little is known or understood about the effect of COVID-19 and food and food safety and the following Questions and Answers serve as a guide to consumers.

1. **How is COVID-19 Spread?**

   COVID-19 is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person. This includes between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet), and through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. 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 mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes.

2. **Are the agricultural produce at the markets safe?**

   Currently there is no evidence of food or food packaging being associated with transmission of COVID-19. Unlike foodborne gastrointestinal (GI) viruses like Norovirus
and Hepatitis A that often make people ill through contaminated food. SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19, is a virus that causes respiratory illness. Foodborne exposure to this virus is not known to be a route of transmission. However, it's always critical to follow the 4 key steps of food safety—clean, separate, cook, and chill—to prevent foodborne illness.

3. **How do I ensure that agricultural produce remain safe for consumption?**

- Firstly, choose produce that are not bruised or damaged.
- At home, wash your hands for 20 seconds with water and soap before and after preparing fresh produce.
- For produce that require peeling, rinse BEFORE you peel it, so dirt and bacteria aren't transferred from the knife onto the fruit or vegetable.
- Gently rub produce while holding under plain running water.
- For firm produce such as watermelon and cucumbers, use a clean vegetable brush or sponge to remove dirt on the outer surface.
- For leafy green vegetables such as lettuce and cabbage, remove the outermost leaves and agitate under running water to loosen surface dirt.
- Finally, dry produce with a clean cloth or paper towel to further reduce bacteria that may be present.

For extra measure, produce can be rinsed in a simple sanitizing solution comprised of 5 tablespoons of bleach per gallon of water. **Only potable water** should be used for washing of hands and produce.

4. **Are there any risk from interacting with animals or consuming animal products?**

To date, there is no evidence of any animal including pets playing a role in the spread of the virus.

General hygiene measures should be applied when handling animals and animal products. These include regular hand washing with soap and potable water after touching animals and animal products, as well as avoiding touching eyes, nose or mouth, and avoiding contact with sick animals or spoiled animal products.

Always remember, you should not handle, slaughter, dress, sell, prepare or consume meat that originates from wild animals or livestock that are sick or that have died from unknown causes. Raw wild meat or uncooked dishes based on the blood of wild animals should not be consumed. These practices place people at high risk of contracting any number of infections.

As per general good food safety practices, raw meat, milk or animal organs should be handled with care, to avoid potential cross-contamination with uncooked foods. When
consuming animal products, ensure meat from healthy animals is cooked thoroughly and remains safe to eat. Cooking food to a temperature of 70°C can help ensure that it is safe for consumption.

5. **Are there any risk from touching food packaging?**

According to the World Health Organisation, the risk of catching the virus that causes Covid-19 from a package that has been moved, travelled, and exposed to different conditions and temperatures is also very low. To date, there is no evidence of human or animal food or food packaging being associated with transmission of the coronavirus that causes Covid-19.

**Always remember the five keys to safer food**

**Key 1: Keep clean**
- Wash your hands before handling food and often during food preparation
- Wash your hands after going to the toilet
- Wash and sanitize all surfaces and equipment used for food preparation
- Protect kitchen areas and food from insects, pests and other animals

**Key 2: Separate raw and cooked**
- Separate raw meat, poultry and seafood from other foods
- Use separate equipment and utensils such as knives and cutting boards for handling raw foods
- Store food in containers to avoid contact between raw and prepared foods

**Key 3: Cook thoroughly**
- Cook food thoroughly, especially meat, poultry, eggs and seafood
- Bring foods like soups and stews to boiling to make sure that they have reached 70°C. For meat and poultry, make sure that juices are clear, not pink. Ideally, use a thermometer
- Reheat cooked food thoroughly

**Key 4: Keep food at safe temperatures**
- Do not leave cooked food at room temperature for more than 2 hours
- Refrigerate promptly all cooked and perishable food (preferably below 5°C)
- Keep cooked food piping hot (more than 60°C) prior to serving
- Do not store food too long even in the refrigerator
- Do not thaw frozen food at room temperature

**Key 5: Use safe water and raw materials**
- Use safe water or treat it to make it safe
✓ Select fresh and wholesome foods
✓ Choose foods processed for safety, such as pasteurized milk
✓ Wash fruits and vegetables, especially if eaten raw
✓ Do not use food beyond its expiry date

Source:
- Pan American Health Organization/ World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO)
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA)
- Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- World Organization For Animal Health (OIE)