

How to Stay Safe at the Grocery Store During Coronavirus

Outbreak

Whether you are grocery shopping for yourself or helping friends and family in need, here's what experts say about staying safe while going in and out of stores.

Exhausting all other options is really important here. Older adults and those at higher risk of complications from COVID-19 must take advantage of alternatives to in-person shopping trips, like asking friends or family to run errands, using a grocery delivery service, or opting for curbside pickup.

Plan your visit

If you need to venture out, make your list and go in and out.

Wear a face mask and gloves.

Part of that approach means visiting stores during off-peak hours when fewer customers are present. This helps to maintain social distancing, staying 6 feet away from others in public as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which is intended to slow the spread of the outbreak,

The same goes for pharmacies, arriving early in the morning to beat crowds. Now's also the time, she says, to ask your health care provider about getting a 90-day supply of medications to limit future outings for refills.

For grocery trips shop at stores that have started implementing precautionary measures of their own, like limiting the number of customers allowed inside the store at one time or putting up markers that keep people properly spaced in line. Many chains now offer special hours for older shoppers, typically in the morning.

In the store

When you enter the store, the experts recommend cleaning the supermarket cart or basket handle with a disinfectant wipe (some stores provide these for free, but availability isn't guaranteed, so bring wipes with you).

As for handling food packages and produce as you shop? You can touch goods and fill your cart as you normally would — being careful to avoid touching your face, nose or mouth for the entirety of your errand.

According to the CDC, “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 own mouth, nose or possibly their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads.”

So more important is maintaining distance from others, a consideration that also arises at checkout.

Choosing between self-checkout or a cashier lane presents what he calls a “risk-risk tradeoff,” because each option poses its own hazards: Self-checkout allows you to avoid face-to-face contact with a cashier, but you'll have to touch parts of the kiosk that many shoppers have touched before you.

Bottom line? Choose the option you're comfortable with. And in either case, both experts say to use a credit or debit card — not cash — when it's time to pay because the former can be safely wiped down with a disinfectant wipe after use (and even in a cashier lane, you'll likely be able to insert your own card into the card reader — bypassing a handoff of bills or coins).

Once you exit the store, clean your hands with a hand sanitizer containing at least 60 percent alcohol, being sure to do this before getting into your vehicle if you're traveling by car.

At home

Once you get in the door, put down any shopping bags or goods on the floor and walk “straight to the sink” to wash your hands.

After that, you can put groceries or other supplies away, after which another round of handwashing.

Given that contact with food and food packaging isn't thought to be a main way the virus spreads, there's no need to carry out any special disinfecting procedures on food packages or produce once you return home (and using products like soap or other disinfectants on food can pose separate health risks).

Instead, rinse fresh produce like you normally would — with clear water and wash your hands before preparing food or eating meals.

Drop-offs and delivery

If you're shopping for someone else, keep your handoff as streamlined as possible.

Ideally, this is a “touchless, interaction less” delivery, in which you leave groceries or supplies on a front step or porch, then call or text the person to alert them.

If you need to go inside someone else's home, follow the same protocol as you would in your own: Put bags down, wash your hands thoroughly, and then put groceries or other supplies away while avoiding all unnecessary contact with surfaces, like leaning on countertops.

If you are on the receiving end of goods that someone else brings into your home or puts away for you, it's a good idea to wipe down door handles and any surfaces they may have touched after they depart. (The CDC already recommends cleaning and disinfecting “high-touch” surfaces like doorknobs and light switches daily.)

Make hygiene a habit

With the need to adhere to social distancing and stricter hygiene habits likely to persist for some time, consistency is important — especially for older adults who may need to rethink daily routines and habits that have been set in place for many years.

"It might be a good idea to map out your strategies. If you keep using the same strategies, you'll never miss a step. It becomes your daily routine.

