

School food programs and COVID-19: Information for volunteers and school staff

Volunteers and school staff are key to ensuring students can receive safe and nutritious food at school. Please remember these general rules before entering a school and starting to prepare food for others. Additional information about COVID-19 and schools can be found [here](#).

- follow the school's policy regarding vaccination requirements
- [self-screen](#) (Government of Ontario) before entering the school and stay home if you are sick
- wear a medical mask when entering the school
- [wash your hands](#) (PDF, 659 KB) (Public Health Ontario) often and when visibly dirty for 15 seconds
- stay two meters (six feet) apart from others
- cover your cough or sneeze with your arm or a tissue, throw the tissue in the garbage, and wash your hands
- avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth

Please note that visitor access to schools may be restricted, please verify with your school about their policies regarding volunteers and visitors.

Food preparation and COVID

The information below is based on various Government of Ontario guidelines and recommendations. The school boards' policies and workplace requirements may differ and include additional information. Please review them before starting the program.

Has there been any changes to food handler requirements?

No, the fundamental food premises regulations and legislation regarding food handlers and food safety remains unchanged. Food preparation (hot or cold foods) is allowed in an inspected kitchen by a volunteer or school staff if proper food handling measures and COVID-19 safety protocols are followed.

Can the virus spread through food or food packaging?

Current evidence suggests that the way COVID-19 is transmitted is through direct contact and respiratory droplets that have the potential of being propelled for up to two meters. There is no evidence to show that COVID-19 spreads through food. It is possible, but understood to be less common, that a person could become infected by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes. The risk of becoming infected from packaging is very low, because the virus does not survive very long on these surfaces.

Should I wear a mask when preparing food?

Yes. In Ontario, you must use a mask in enclosed public spaces (public indoor spaces) and whenever physical distancing is a challenge. Volunteers and school staff will also need to follow the school boards' mask policy. For more information on masks and face coverings: <https://www.phsd.ca/health-topics-programs/diseases-infections/coronavirus/guidance-for-wearing-non-medical-masks>.

Should I wear gloves when preparing food?

[Glove use](#) is not recommended. Food handlers must wash their hands with soap and water (not hand sanitizer) before and after preparing food, and as often as necessary to prevent the contamination of food, utensils, and equipment. For more information on hand washing: <https://www.phsd.ca/health-topics-programs/diseases-infections/preventative-measures/handwashing>.

Do food items without packaging (e.g., apples, mini cucumbers, muffins) need to be pre-packaged before being served to students?

No, these food items do not need to be individually packaged. For whole vegetables and fruit, be sure to wash them under cool running water and then place in a sanitized bin. Before serving the food, the food handler should wash their hands and students should wash their hands before eating.

Can reusable plates and cutlery be used?

Yes, reusable plates and cutlery can be used if these items are being washed following requirements under the [food premises regulation](#) (Government of Ontario).

Can students be involved in the preparation or serving of food?

Students can resume helping to prepare and serve food provided that all food handlers use adequate food safety practices. This applies to instructional activities (e.g., food and nutrition course) and school food programs (e.g., breakfast club and Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program).

Food serving and COVID

Do school nutrition programs still need to use a “Grab and Go” (prepackaged) format to serve food to students?

School food programs are not required to follow this format and can resume using their preferred serving format including family style or buffet style. Proper hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette should be followed as well as physical distancing between cohorts and within cohorts.

Can students serve themselves or does an adult need to serve students?

Students can serve themselves if proper hand hygiene is followed before grabbing any food or utensil. It is recommended that a utensil be used to serve food since it minimizes direct hand contact.

Does food need to be served in the classroom?

No, however having food brought to the classroom in a bin or tray is ideal because there is less movement of people and cohorts don't get mixed. If students need to get their food in an area outside their classroom, they should be instructed to keep as much distance between each other and at least two meters between cohorts. Students should also be instructed to wash their hands before taking any food and follow respiratory etiquette.

How often do eating areas need to be cleaned and disinfected?

It is suggested that cleaning and disinfection of high touch surfaces in eating areas (e.g., tables, sinks, countertops) take place twice daily at a minimum and more frequently depending on the frequency of use and extent of soilage.

Proper hand hygiene is required before and after eating. Can a hand sanitizer be used, or does it need to be soap and water?

Hands should be washed with soap and water for 15 seconds. If not available, and if hands are not visibly soiled, use a hand sanitizer with an alcohol content of at least 60%.

For any further questions about food safety related to student nutrition programs, please call Public Health Sudbury & Districts at 705.522.9200, ext. 464 (toll-free 1.866.522.9200).