

October 2020

Re: Supporting Healthy, Local School Food through a COVID-19 Lens

Attention: Parents, Teachers and Administrators, School Trustees and Supporters of Healthy School Food

As your schools find their way during the COVID-19 pandemic, we wanted to connect about school food. We recognize there are unique challenges this year to ensure that students remain safe and healthy at school, and we do not want food safety concerns to be a barrier to healthy school food programs. Healthy school food programs benefit the physical and mental wellbeing of students and increase community connections within schools. Below are some questions and answers regarding food safety in schools during the pandemic.

Q: Can COVID-19 be transmitted through food?

A: There are no documented cases nor evidence to suggest that COVID-19 can be spread through food or packaging. www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/prevention-risks/food-safety

Q: Why is it not recommended to bring home-prepared food into schools at this time?

A: There are less checks and balances on how home kitchens are sanitized and how food is prepared. Preparing food at home can increase the number of people handling the food as well as increase the number of people coming into the school. It is not recommended to share food and drink at this time.

Q: Do we need to take special precautions to prepare and serve food in schools during the pandemic?

A: The standard food safe principles used to limit the spread of any foodborne illness will prevent the spread of COVID-19. School administration protocols for preventing the spread of COVID-19 will be necessary for those working with food in the school (such as mask use, safe numbers of people working in a space, enhanced cleaning/sanitation etc.). Environmental Health Officers can provide support to school staff or volunteers with plans around food safety and cleaning. Food safety plans are recommended (but are not required for breakfast programs, salad bar programs or other food access programs that are not regulated under the *Food Premises Regulation*). For more info on food safety please visit:

www.islandhealth.ca/learn-about-health/food-safety/food-safety

www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/COVID_public_guidance/Guidance-k-12-schools (p.14 & p.24)

Q: Can produce from community gardens be served to students?

A: Yes, fresh fruits and vegetables can be served if they are prepared in the school kitchen or another approved kitchen (Island Health approved). They should not be prepped (chopped) in home kitchens.

Q: Can reusable dishes be used safely in school food programs?

A: Yes, reusable dishes can be safely washed on the sanitize cycle in a standard dishwasher (NSF standard 184) or washed in a commercial dishwasher. If a dishwasher is not available, it is safe to wash, rinse and sanitize dishes in three separate sinks or basins.

www.foodsafe.ca/docs/Common_Sanitizing_Solutions.pdf

www.islandhealth.ca/sites/default/files/2018-05/dishwashing-steps-sign.pdf

Q: Should I wear gloves when preparing and serving food?

A: Good hand hygiene is preferred over glove use when preparing and serving food. This is due to the fact that gloves can give a false sense of security and sometimes are not changed as often as they should in order to prevent cross contamination. Good hand hygiene includes washing your hands for 20 seconds under running warm water (or using hand sanitizer (min. of 60% alcohol) when hand washing is not possible) before, during and after preparing and serving food.

Q: How should store-bought items or restaurant-made foods be served?

A: While food itself does not present a common transmission point for COVID19, food service/distribution involves the use of high touch surfaces (e.g. serving utensils) and leads to potential crowding while food is provided and consumed - these risks need to be appropriately managed. It is recommended that students be served these foods by an adult who is practicing stringent hand hygiene and following the recommended safety protocols. This is especially important for foods that are not individually wrapped (e.g. vegetable platters, individual pieces of fruit, muffins) and for elementary students who may touch or breathe on the food. For secondary students, if an adult is not available to serve the food, it is recommended that safety protocol signage be posted, hand sanitizer provided, and that students be supervised. Environmental Health Officers can provide support to school staff or volunteers with reviewing safety plans if needed.

Q: Will parents and community volunteers be able to help with school meal programs?

A: Please work with School Administrators in advance to enter the school if coming on site for food prep or meal service. COVID-19 Precautions, such as masks, appropriate number of people able to work in a space and wellness checks will be outlined by the Schools Administration Protocols.

Please feel free to reach out if you have questions.

Yours in health,

Heather Hutton, Environmental Health Officer, Island Health: Heather.Hutton@viha.ca 250-737-2011 (food safety questions)

Janet Krenz, Public Health Dietitian, Island Health: Janet.Krenz@viha.ca 250-709-3050 (nutrition/healthy school resources, connection with local food hub)