

COVID-19 and Reusables

A guide for hospitality businesses
to navigate international
policies and recommendations
concerning single use plastics in
the context of COVID-19.

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SUMMARY

The food and tourist industry are at the forefront of interaction with the public. Despite the apparent initial increase of disposable items, many establishments and governments – supported by research and common sense – are continuing to **reduce plastic waste and prioritize reusables**.

Protection from the novel coronavirus does not require more throwaway plastic polluting our world. Moreover, **the use of disposable materials is not associated with greater protection from infection (1)**. It is pertinent to remember that “Public health must include maintaining the cleanliness of our home, the Earth”. **(2)**

Here we consider the priority safety measures, mask and glove use, and guidelines for supporting reusables; namely cups, bags, straws and bottled water, as these are amongst the plastic items most commonly found in our oceans and landscapes. This information was drawn from regulatory documents for tourist businesses, and the leading international scientific sources for COVID-19, plastics and reusables.

While every effort's been made to ensure this guide's accuracy, it isn't legal advice tailored to your individual circumstances. If you act on it, you acknowledge that you do so at your own risk. We can't assume responsibility or accept liability for damage or loss as a result of your reliance on it.

1. PRIORITY SAFETY MEASURES: WHAT ARE OUR STRONGEST DEFENCES?

A good way to start is by keeping in mind these **essential and simple measures** for protecting public health. Important in all contexts, especially in the food and service industry, these preventative measures are drawn from leading national and international health organizations. Stated briefly here, follow the links in the bibliography for detailed descriptions. Country specific guidelines may vary slightly (eg. Safety distances).

HAND WASHING

Wash hands frequently and thoroughly, for at least 20 seconds, using soap to neutralize the virus. Gels comprising <70% alcohol may supplement when frequent hand washing is not feasible. Avoid touching your face after washing hands. **(3)**

SAFE DISTANCES

Keep at least one meter away from everyone else as the virus is primarily transferred through airborne particles. Country specific guidelines for safe distancing may vary. **(4)**

RESPIRATORY HYGIENE

Cough or sneeze **into a tissue**, to be disposed of in the bin immediately. If this is not possible, and as a last resort, cough or sneeze into **your elbow, not your hands.** **(4)**

MATERIAL CLEANLINESS

Wash and disinfect surfaces that are frequently touched, specifically following use after each guest – **hospitality businesses are frequented by many people so be very cautious and active on this.** Keep containers and equipment clean using hot water and soap. **(4)**

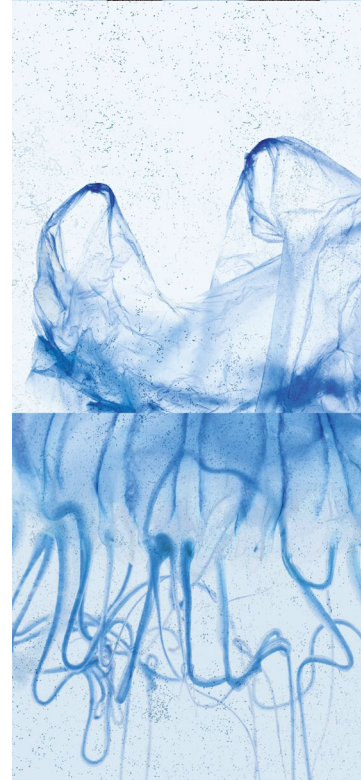
2. COVID-19 TRANSMISSION AND PLASTIC

The COVID-19 virus is primarily transmitted through respiratory droplets. Contact transfer is rarer, but still considered possible. **(6,7)**

The novel coronavirus lives on plastic surfaces for up to 72 hours – and may live longer than this depending on conditions. The virus is considered to have a longer 'staying power' on plastic than on any other materials tested. **(8)**

Increasing the use of disposable packaging increases the volume of material we encounter. Also, the contact that this material has had along the production line is unknown, so it is important to reduce packaging where you can. **(9)**

Summary: Single use plastic items are not in themselves a safer option against potential diseases. **Proper hygiene rules must be applied** in any case and washing our reusable items thoroughly with soap and hot water is the best defense. **(10)**



3. WHAT ABOUT MASKS AND GLOVES?

Masks and gloves have become **widely used** in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This does not mean that these products must be made of plastic, or that they are the only method of protection.

MASKS

Reusable masks are an important safety measure especially when one meter distancing is difficult to maintain; they reduce the spread of the tiny respiratory droplets we emit when we breathe, talk, laugh and so on – on which the virus can hitch a ride. **Fabric masks** are considered to perform most of the tasks of a disposable surgical mask, without the associated waste. Proper mask use is important for their effectiveness, along with regular washing (at the highest temperature that the material allows) and ironing. Correct mask use includes washing hands before applying and removing the mask, touching only the straps, and fitting it properly over nose, mouth and chin without gaps. For more detailed instructions, refer to the relevant WHO guidelines linked at the end of this document. **(11, 12)**

GLOVES

According to the WHO **handwashing is a greater protective barrier** to infection than wearing disposable gloves. Proper hand hygiene must be practiced such as, **washing hands** before and after each pair of gloves is worn. Gloves should be changed after contact with items of high contamination risk (phone, doorknobs, clothes, etc.). **(13)**

4. UNDERSTANDING GLOBAL REQUIREMENTS FOR THE HOSPITALITY SECTOR IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

MASKS

Mask requirements in hospitality businesses will differ from place to place. Given the widespread adoption of mask wearing recommendations for the general public, masks are expected to be part of the protective measures that businesses are instructed to practice. This is even more important in hospitality where there is high client/employee interaction and people from various locations are in together in a single location.

95% of countries have recommended mask wearing in certain areas in public, such as public transport or indoor public spaces. For a full map and breakdown of country specific guidelines, see the Masks4All page: <https://masks4all.co/what-countries-require-masks-in-public/>

GLOVES

Glove use is understood to serve little purpose in most positions of the hospitality industry, nevertheless local guidelines will dictate when glove use cannot be avoided.

Proper hand washing is identified as a greater protective measure than disposable gloves, and should be practiced diligently whether or not gloves are worn. Once another surface has been touched after, do not touch eyes, face, or mouth and as soon as possible wash hands or use gel sanitizer again.

REUSABLES

Few references to reusables have been identified in official guidelines. This suggests that most authorities do not consider reusables to be an issue for safety.

Here are several relevant positions:

WHO

- The WHO maintain that infection through contact with food, or packaging is highly unlikely
- Although transmission from a recently infected surface cannot be ruled out
- If a person has handled this surface and then touched their mouth, nose or eyes – this is called smear transmission.
- Hygiene measures and safe distances are emphasized in the WHO Food Safety document
- WHO does recommend disposable packaging, or that hygiene and sanitation protocols be implemented for reusable containers.

GERMANY

- German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment states there is no evidence that the virus has been contracted through contact with food, objects or surfaces.
- Chances of a smear transmission cannot be ruled out.
- Practices of hygiene and avoiding touching one's face should be used to protect against viral spread. **(14)**

EU

- EU health protocols for tourism establishments emphasize hygiene and safe distancing with no mention of reusable or disposable containers. **(15)**
- European Commission rejected a bid by the European plastics trade association to halt the ban on single-use plastics.
- Commission Spokesperson for the Environment, Vivian Loonela stated "good hygiene practices should be applied to all products, including substitutes of banned SUPs", continuing to say that "in the current circumstances where many essential economic activities, including waste management, are under pressure, it is even more important to continue the overall efforts to reduce waste." **(16)**

SINGAPORE

- The Singapore Food Agency (SFA) encourages everyone to bring their own clean, reusable, containers to eateries.
- Addresses the need for reducing waste and eases the demand for disposable packaging.
- Have also called on businesses to accept reusables.
- Cited no increased risk associated with using BYO packaging as long as reasonable hygiene measures are practiced, which are necessary anyway. **(17)**

USA

- FDA makes no mention of preferring throwaway items in times of COVID. **(18)**
- CDC's Considerations for Restaurants and Bars page suggests avoiding sharable items such as menus and condiments, in favor of disposable or digital menu and single serving condiments.
- Establishments are asked to consider using "disposable food service items (e.g., utensils, dishes, napkins, tablecloths). If disposable items are not feasible or desirable, ensure that all non-disposable food service items are handled with gloves and washed with dish soap and hot water, or in a dishwasher."
- Finally, the considerations state "avoid use of food and beverage utensils and containers brought in by customers." **(19)**
- Inclination for throwaway items has been questioned even by one of the CDC's own consultants. **(6)**
- Rollbacks in plastic bag bans or halts of BYO bags have also been enacted in several states including Oregon, Illinois, Massachusetts and Maine. **(20)**

FURTHER TRENDS - UPHOLDING PLASTIC BANS

By and large, regulatory roll-backs towards throwaway plastic are reportedly a rarity at the global level according to a lead economist at the World Bank. Hundreds of jurisdictions are sticking to their introduced bans or fees on single-use plastic. In Africa, these include Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, and Uganda whose plastic bag ban came into action alongside coronavirus containment measures. **(21)**

Some corporate food chains such as Starbucks have temporarily stopped accepting reusable cups. **(22)** Other regional authorities are weakening their bans on single-use plastics such as South West Australia which was planning a ban of several disposable plastics including straws and cutlery. **(23)** The UK has paused a charge on plastic bags for online deliveries and Scotland's deposit-return scheme is being delayed. **(22)**

Local conditions should be taken into account according to your location and business. We hope this policy review demonstrates that the collective tide is still turning towards cleaner waters and greater health for our global community, and that we are in good company in helping make well informed, safe decisions for the hospitality industry and its customers.



5. WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO USE AND ACCEPT REUSABLES?

For straws, cups, bags, bottles and other relevant items:

General process for reducing single use plastic in these items:

1. Review alternative options to single use items (including glass, paper, metal, etc.).
2. Source compostable products that fit needs, or create system to allow users to bring in products that can be, or are already, sanitized.
3. Create sanitization scheme with hot water and soap.
4. Create transfer system between staff and customers that limits interaction.
5. Inform customers on acceptable products and processes to ensure safe standards are upheld.
6. Track progress and review alternatives if issues arise.

What you can do as a business to encourage low waste preferences:

1. Determine areas of high waste generation and find suitable, circular or reusable, products that will help reduce waste.
2. Inform customers (via signage, verbally, or media) of transition of products and new process or products.
3. Track transitions and adjust processes as needed until waste generation is limited to suitable levels.



CUPS

A.

CUSTOMER



B.

BARRISTA



C.

BARRISTA



D.

CUSTOMER



1. Allow for reusable options with proper process (see below)

- Customer places their clean reusable cup (without the lid) on a designated tray and steps back 2 meters.
- Barista makes the drink in a normal crockery cup.
- Barista pours the drink into the reusable cup without touching it, and takes the tray back to the till, stepping back 2 meters.
- Customer takes their coffee and enjoys! (24, 25).

2. Where is it safe to do so customers could have their coffee to stay and enjoy a nice break!

3. Source alternative, compostable options.



STRAWS

- Reusable straws (metal, glass, etc.)
- Remove straws all together.
- Source alternative, compostable options (paper, pasta, bamboo, etc.)

Businesses commonly ask us whether straws should be individually wrapped according to Covid-19 guidelines. However, no regulatory indications have been identified for this.



DELIVERY

- Provide a returned container after taking a deposit.
- Customers can deposit a contained in advance and have product delivered at a later date.
- Distanced delivery with drop off and notification is encouraged.



WATER BOTTLES

- Allow for reusable options with proper process (see below).
 - Customers can refill themselves using a sanitized stations (water jugs, closed jugs, etc.)
 - Customers can provide bottles that are sanitized by staff and water added.
- Provide paper (or other compostable material) cups of water.
- Provide sanitary reusables that are cleaned between uses.
- To **refill** your customers' water bottles, you can give them a cup of water and let them fill their own bottle.

In establishments where bottles are provided, such as hotels and restaurants, **glass bottles must be thoroughly washed in a dishwasher between uses.** Then used bottles can be exchanged for clean filled ones. (26)



TAKE AWAY

- Customers bring their own container.
 - The container is placed on a clean surface such as a tray.
 - The meal is prepared and placed in the container without handling it.
 - The filled container is taken by the customer and the tray or surface is disinfected again. (27)
- Sell reusable lunch boxes.
- Provide a returned container after taking a deposit.



MENUS

- Have the menu online
 - Present a QR code.
 - Offer a weblink that people can use to access the menu.
- Have a large, visible menu.
- Provide laminated, disinfected menus, if allowed in your region.



BAGS

- Have a sign asking customers to make sure their reusable bags are washed.
- Allow customers to bag their own produce and items at the checkout counter.



6. FURTHER WASTE REDUCTION

DISINFECTANT CONTAINERS

Guidelines call for disinfectant dispensers to be placed liberally around establishments, in areas of high footfall, such as on both sides of reception desks and checkout counters.

The push top disinfectants are **not recycled** and create a lot of waste. But there may be **refill solutions available**.

Look up local bulk or zero waste shops to see if they offer refillable disinfectant products.

TABLECLOTHS

Bare surfaces can readily be cleaned with cloth and disinfectant.

If you have to use tablecloths consider fabric first and foremost. If you must use disposal cloths, then ensure you opt for a compostable paper with no plastic lining.

GLOVES

In situations where gloves are mandatory, and you really cannot avoid them, keep in mind that they cannot be recycled and should go in the general waste bins.

The same goes for biodegradable gloves, as they need specific conditions to biodegrade that are not met in nature. If you have access to a specialized compost management service, ask if they will accept biodegradable gloves.

MASKS

If you use a throw-away mask that contains synthetic fibres, make sure to dispose of it in the correct bin. The complexity of the material makes recycling problematic and therefore it should be disposed of in the general waste.



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Please reuse then recycle.

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Thank you