

Melissa Walter, MPH, RDN, LDN
Kate Sayre, MPH, RDN, LDN
Gillings School of Global Public Health, Department of Nutrition

March is National Nutrition Month, and we've nearly let that fact slip by in the wake of COVID-19, self-quarantines, and social distancing! We thought it would be a great opportunity to answer some common food and nutrition questions related to our current food environment. Questions? Reach out to us at melissawalter@unc.edu or kate.sayre@unc.edu

1. Stocking Up: What do I need at home?

- a. What foods will last the longest, so that I don't have to go to the grocery store as often?
 - i. *You can purchase a variety of food and then have a plan to use it accordingly. Use fresh items first—like vegetables, fruit, and meat. Then you can utilize frozen, canned, and shelf-stable items.*
 - ii. *For shelf-stable items, look for dried or canned beans, peas, and lentils; canned vegetables (preferably with no added salt); dried or canned fruit in 100% fruit juice; whole grains (such as brown rice, quinoa, oats, millet and whole-wheat pasta); canned fish and chicken; nuts, seeds, and nut butters.*
 - iii. *For frozen items, we recommend frozen vegetables and fruit, fish, and chicken. You can also keep bread in the freezer and remove slices as needed, and you can use fresh items to make soups and stews then freeze them for later use.*
 - iv. *Once you purchase your food, be sure to store it appropriately:*
<https://www.eatright.org/-/media/feature/eatright/coronavirus/infographics/foodstorageinfographic.pdf>
- b. How can I continue to eat a balanced diet?
 - i. *Aim to include produce (fresh, frozen, or canned), whole grain carbohydrates, and lean protein (beans or lentils if you don't have lean meat, fish, yogurt, or tofu). Harvard's Healthy Eating Plate is a good visual: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/healthy-eating-plate/>*
 - ii. *Think outside the box or off the plate—things like soups and stews can include all the components of a balanced meal and also freeze very well. Cooking once and then eating multiple times can really help.*
 - iii. *You may need to eat a bit differently than you're used to, and that's okay. There are many healthy options that are shelf-stable or frozen.*
 - iv. *Meal planning is key: take stock of the items you have and plan around those.*
- c. Can I get all of the nutrients I need if I can't get fresh fruits and vegetables?
 - i. *Yes! Frozen vegetables and fruit are flash-frozen within hours of harvesting at peak ripeness, which makes their nutrient content comparable to fresh.*

- ii. *In some cases, canning and freezing may actually preserve nutrients and their availability.*
- iii. *Canned and frozen produce is available year-round and can actually increase variety in one's diet.*

2. Building Immunity: Foods and Supplements

- a. I read that some hospitals are using high-dose vitamin C to treat COVID-19. Should I start taking high doses at home?
 - i. *There is no current evidence to support the idea that vitamin C will minimize COVID-19 symptoms or shorten the duration of the disease. Hospitals implementing this therapy are doing so as a trial, in conjunction with other therapies; they are administering the vitamin intravenously; and they are using doses much higher than is recommended for oral use at home. If you DO significantly increase your vitamin C intake, be prepared for headache and gastrointestinal symptoms, and don't confuse these with COVID-19 symptoms!*
- b. What vitamins or supplements should I take to prevent or treat COVID-19?
 - i. *Currently there are no evidence-based supplements to prevent or treat COVID-19. Those unregulated by the FDA may be harmful and even life-threatening. Please check with your provider before starting any supplements.*
- c. How can I support my health during this time?
 - i. *To support your health and immunity, we recommend eating balanced meals—fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and protein provide the nutrients necessary for a strong immune system and optimal functioning. In addition, staying well-hydrated, getting adequate rest, caring for your mental health, and limiting social media or news sources if they add to stress can all boost mental and physical health. Unfortunately, there is no quick fix, but all these areas will pay off!*
- d. Staying hydrated? Oh yeah...I read that drinking water every 15 minutes can kill coronavirus!
 - i. *Unfortunately, that's a myth that's not supported by any evidence or biochemistry. You likely heard that frequently drinking water can wash the virus through your GI tract, where it can be destroyed by stomach acid. However, it's the viral particles that you inhale through your mouth or nose that make their way into your respiratory tract and lead to the viral infection COVID-19.*

3. Food Safety: Grocery Stores and Restaurants

- a. Is it safe to eat food from restaurants?
 - i. *As long as you are picking up food and taking it home, it's very likely that your meal won't pose a health risk. Cooking kills the virus—so if you eat viral particles in food, they will have to be present in uncooked food to cause a problem. (Wash your apples!) We don't have any evidence to suggest that COVID-19 is a foodborne illness (there are NO examples, to date, of someone getting COVID-19 from food), so you should be safe as*

long as your food is cooked and you have removed your food from any packaging on which there may be viral particles. Don't forget to wash your hands after you remove that packaging and before eating!

- b. Can I get COVID-19 from food I buy at the grocery store?
- i. *It's very unlikely that you would get COVID-19 from food purchased at the grocery store. Most cases of transmission involve people who have had sustained exposure to the virus (10-15 minutes or more). You would only be able to get the virus at the store if you touched food that had a significant viral load on its surface (as could happen if someone coughed on it), then touched your eyes, nose, or mouth to transfer the virus. Be careful not to touch your face unless you have just washed your hands, and wash/sanitize frequently. Extra precautions you could take include washing produce when you get home and allowing packaged foods to sit for a few days before touching them again.*
- c. What if someone sick coughs on my food?
- i. *Again, as far as we know, you would have to either inhale these particles (which is more likely when they are airborne, not sitting on the surface of your food) or touch them on your food then touch your eyes, nose, or mouth. Washing raw foods, cooking and/or reheating foods, and washing your hands before eating should prevent transmission of the virus.*

Resources for further reading:

- Carolina Farm Stewardship Association: Connect with many local farmers who are now using online ordering systems and pick-up or delivery to help with social distancing <https://www.carolinafarmstewards.org/on-farm-pickups/?fbclid=IwAR1aOa8i1YE5n9sdcopwJiuaVxhssowHyEeDltUUyIXENXa7D9pt-sl2mew>
- Chapel Hill/Carrboro Takeout Options: Chapelboro shares a frequently updated list of local restaurants offering takeout and/or delivery <https://chapelboro.com/town-square/covid-19-okay-so-whats-open-restaurants-serving-takeout-and-delivery>
- NCSU Safe Plates: Read about food safety and ask questions of the professionals! <https://www.facebook.com/SafePlatesFSIC/photos/a.1975238482762461/2745671749052460/?type=3&theater>
- Proper Handwashing: Not sure how to properly wash your hands or when? The National Restaurant Association has a video for you! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GwplDnu_gc&feature=youtu.be
- Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: General food and nutrition tips during this pandemic https://www.eatrightpro.org/coronavirus-resources?_zs=OD6Fa&_zl=woP22