

COVID-19 Reopening Considerations

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many restaurants and food service businesses to shift to survival strategies like carryout or delivery service. Some even had to close their doors for an extended period. As the COVID-19 threat shifts, several states have officially begun implementing reopening measures. However, as restaurants prepare to open their dining rooms, there are numerous factors to consider in order to preserve the health and safety of both employees and guests. As you plan to reopen your restaurant, it's important to update your existing policies and procedures.

Review the following guidance to help keep your employees and guests safe as you resume normal operations and ensure a successful reopening. Keep in mind that this guidance is general in nature. Depending on the location of your business, you may need to account for additional state and local requirements or restrictions.

Employee Health and Safety

It's important to check that employees are healthy as they report to work and come into contact with other employees, food or guests. It doesn't matter if the employee works in the front or back of the house—per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance, any employee who is sick should stay home. Similarly, if an employee becomes ill or shows symptoms during a prework screening, they should be sent home.

Make sure your policies clearly indicate when ill employees can return to work. At a minimum, you should follow CDC guidelines and have employees self-quarantine for seven days from the onset of their symptoms.

It should be noted that the CDC has not mandated taking employees' temperatures. If your establishment chooses to do so, it's best to adopt policies that align with proper procedures and consult local health officials if you have questions. To further protect your employees' health and safety, consider the following measures:

- Provide clear instruction and guidance so employees know what is expected during opening, prep, service and closing procedures.
- Train all employees on the importance of frequent hand-washing, the use of hand sanitizers and avoiding touching their hands to face.
- Require employees to wear a mask or face covering. Provide all personal protective equipment required for employees to do their jobs, including masks and gloves.
- Limit the number of employees allowed simultaneously in break rooms or other communal areas.

It's understandable that policies may need to evolve as local regulations change, so frequent and transparent communication to employees will be vital to the success of your restaurant's reopening. Be upfront with employee expectations and consequences, and continue to document protocols and procedures.

Cleaning and Sanitizing

Familiarize yourself with requirements from your local health department, and make sure you are adhering to them. It's important to train employees on cleaning and disinfecting procedures and protective measures per the

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CDC and Food and Drug Administration. Additionally, consider these measures:

- Sanitize and deep clean your entire facility, especially if it's been closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Don't overlook seldom-touched surfaces either.
- Utilize appropriate cleaning chemicals in food preparation and contact areas.
- Sanitize high-contact areas in the front and back of the house (e.g., touch screens, doorknobs, buttons, cooler doors and checkout counters) every two hours or after each guest leaves the area, if possible.
- Clean and sanitize table condiments, digital-ordering devices, check presenters, self-service areas and tabletops between guests. Additionally, consider providing condiments by request or offering single-use, disposable containers.
- Sanitize restrooms frequently. Sinks in restrooms should have running water and be stocked with hand soap, disposable paper towels and a plastic-lined waste container.
- Clean and sanitize reusable menus after each use. If using paper menus, discard them after each use.
- Do not use disinfecting wipes to clean more than one surface. Use one wipe per item or area, and discard them after each use or when they are visibly soiled.
- Provide hand sanitizers at entrances, exits, service counters and any other guest touch points. Consider touchless solutions as well.

Food Safety

Food safety has always been a priority for the restaurant industry. Follow and maintain food-safety practices carefully as you consider new COVID-19 safety protocols. Specifically, keep in mind the following measures:

- Change, wash and sanitize utensils frequently. Use rolled silverware and napkins stored in sealed bags.

Employees should roll silverware in designated sanitary areas and should not preset tables.

- Use single-use gloves or deli tissue when handling food, if appropriate.
- Discard all out-of-date food items.
- Wrap food containers to prevent cross contamination.
- Stock coolers at minimum levels if providing grab-and-go service.
- Close all self-service food and drink stations (e.g., coffee carafes, fountain soda machines, salad bars and buffets).
- Ensure the person in charge of food service operations is ServSafe certified, and that their certification is up to date.
- Provide a food handling training refresher to all employees upon reopening. Ongoing education protects your business, employees and guests.

Social Distancing

Guests, as well as employees, should practice social distancing. Social distancing is an important strategy to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Consider the following guidance to protect everyone who walks through your doors:

- Consider separate entrances and exits to limit customer contact with other patrons.
- Post signage at the entrance stating that no one with a fever or symptoms of COVID-19 can enter the restaurant.
- Base social distancing measures on square footage in both service and guest areas.
- Update floor plans and seating arrangements as follows:
 - Maintain 6 feet of separation between tables.

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- Leave two bar stools empty between guests who are not in the same party.
- Apply similar rules to outdoor patio areas.
- Limit party sizes based on recommendations provided by your local and state government.
- Monitor the number of guests on your premises.
- Limit contact between wait staff and guests.
- Consider a reservations-only or call-ahead-seating process to better space guests and control party sizes.
- Ensure guests stay separated while waiting for seating and don't congregate in waiting or bar areas. For example, you could create floor markings or have guests wait outside—6 feet apart—or in their vehicles.
- Ensure employees and guests adhere to social distancing guidelines when using the restroom.
- Install physical barriers where practical, (e.g., booth seating or partitions).
- Use technology to reduce person-to-person interactions (e.g., cashless payments, mobile ordering, menu tablets, contactless payment and mobile texting for waiting and seating updates).
- Remind outside partners or suppliers about internal distancing requirements.

Delivery and Carryout

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many restaurants focused on being able to provide carryout and delivery service. As dining rooms open up, you can continue offering online sales, pickup and delivery to reduce the number of guests coming inside to limit face-to-face interaction. You may also consider allowing guests to preorder dine-in meals to reduce guests' time on site. If you're offering carryout options:

- Establish a designated pickup zone.

- Provide guides (e.g., tape on floor) or signage to inform customers of food pickup protocols.
- Offer curbside pickup.
- Practice social distancing by offering to place orders in vehicle trunks.

Remind third-party delivery drivers about internal distancing requirements when they are picking up orders. If you're offering delivery options:

- Encourage no-touch deliveries.
- Provide order updates via text messages or phone calls.
- Ensure coolers and other transport containers are cleaned and sanitized.
- Maintain time and temperature controls.
- Avoid cross contamination (e.g., wrap food during transport).
- Carry hand sanitizer or wipes to clean hands often.

Continued Safety

By following these precautions, your restaurant can benefit from providing quality food and service to your community once again. As stay-at-home mandates are loosened, it's important for restaurants and other food service businesses to keep their employees and customers as healthy and safe as possible.

For additional reopening resources and guidance as businesses move into COVID-19 recovery mode, contact Wallace Welch & Willingham today.