



Grocery Shopping & Kitchen Hacks

A Guide to Safely Shop for Groceries & Prepare Food During COVID-19

As the [COVID-19](#) pandemic spreads globally, people have been instructed to remain in isolation and to only leave the house for essential items, which has made grocery shopping one of the most anxiety-producing, yet necessary, activities at this time. If you must make the trip, what's the safest way to do so? Below you will find recommended practices for shopping at the store, what to do with your items when you get home, take out and grocery delivery suggestions, and kitchen hacks to make the most of what's available and what you have on hand.

AT THE STORE

Public health officials continue to advise people to stay home as much as possible and to limit grocery shopping trips to once a week or less, alone if possible, and not during peak times. The more often you leave the home, and the more people that are at the store, the more the risk of contracting or spreading the virus increases. Some tips for a safer shopping experience are outlined below.

Shop Outside Peak Times: Many stores have devoted the first hour of the day to seniors or other shoppers who may be at higher risk, so check with your local store for special shopping hours. If you have flexibility with your daily work schedule, try shopping during non-peak hours. The most crowded times to shop are midday on weekends, and between 4:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. on weekdays. You may also want to reference [this map](#) before you head to the store, it shows the potential waiting times at Toronto grocery stores near you.

Have a Plan: Make a list of what you need and categorize your list based on where the items are typically located in the store (i.e. fresh produce, frozen foods), so you can get in and out of the store as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Wipe Down the Cart: When you arrive, wipe down the cart with a sanitizing wipe, whether you bring your own or use those the store provides. Think about disinfecting the areas of the cart that someone's hands are touching the most, like the cart handle, and dispose of the used wipe immediately after use. Consider taking extra sanitizing wipes with you for your shopping trip and use those to pick up products and open freezer doors.

Commit to What You're Purchasing: Commit to what you're buying and try to touch as little as possible. Stores are doing their best to sanitize often, but not every product and surface can be sanitized.

Maintain Physical Distancing: Do your best to keep two metres between yourself and other shoppers. Most stores are limiting the amount of people allowed in at one time and have designated areas to stand while in line to checkout.

Use the Self-Checkout: Utilize the self-checkout and bag your own groceries when you can to minimize contact with others. Use sanitizing wipes on the screen and merchant terminal key pad, if possible.

Dispose of Gloves When You Leave: If you're wearing gloves to the store, make sure you dispose or disinfect once you leave the store as they could potentially be contaminated.

WHEN YOU GET HOME

While the [USDA reports](#) there is no evidence of food or food packaging being associated with transmission of COVID-19, like other viruses, it is possible that it can survive on surfaces or objects. The [New England Journal of Medicine](#) confirmed in a recent study that the virus can survive on different surfaces for varying lengths of time. For example, the virus was more stable on plastic and stainless-steel materials (up to 72 hours) than on cardboard (up to 24 hours). While other experts say there is no reason to worry about the groceries you bring home carrying the virus, it's better to be safe than sorry and following these basic hygiene steps will help keep your groceries safe from potential contamination.

Leave Groceries Outside: If you can, leave your grocery items in the garage, car, or on the balcony, for up to three days. If you must bring them in immediately, use the modified sterile techniques below to remove possible contaminants.

Take Off Your Shoes: Try to avoid tracking unnecessary germs in to your house and take your shoes off outside or in the garage before you bring the groceries in.

Wash Your Hands and Sanitize the Counter: Follow [CDC instructions](#) and wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water. Disinfect the counter or space that you will use to unpack the groceries.

Divide the Counter: Using a piece of tape, draw a line down the middle of the counter, designating one side for products once they have been cleaned.

Wipe Down Packaging: Using a sanitizing wipe or a piece of paper towel saturated in disinfectant, wipe down all plastic and other thick packaging, like glass jars and tetra pack containers.

Get Rid of Unnecessary Packaging: Because the virus may be able to live on cardboard for up to 24 hours, it's best to get rid of unnecessary packaging, like a cereal box for example. Remove the plastic bag from inside or transfer the cereal to a Tupperware. For items like bread or chips, you may want to transfer those to an alternative storage container you have on hand.

Wash Your Produce: A habit that you should adopt going forward (if you haven't already), is to wash fruits and vegetables before consumption. According to the [FDA](#), all you need to clean produce is water. Fill your sink with water and use a vegetable scrubber to remove dirt and impurities before consuming.

Wash Reusable Bags: If you're using reusable bags, be sure to wash or sanitize after each use.

When it comes time to prepare and cook your foods, continue to take the same [food handling precautions](#) you regularly would when preparing foods (separate raw meat from other foods, cook to the right temperature, and refrigerate foods promptly). There is no need to clean meat or poultry, like eggs, as cooking at normal temperatures is said to kill the virus.

TAKEOUT & GROCERY DELIVERY

If you live in an area that offers online shopping, delivery or curbside pickup, you may be wondering which is the safest option. Toronto's associate medical officer of health, [Dr. Vinita Dubey](#), says online shopping carries less risk of COVID-19 infection and "given that the virus is spread through close contact with a person, avoiding contact with individuals through grocery shopping is preferred." A few suggestions for ordering groceries and takeout include:

Order Earlier than Usual: Most delivery companies are dealing with a delay in order processing times and many grocery stores are booking delivery and curbside pick up times for weeks in advance.

Avoid Direct Handoff: Opt for contactless delivery, tipping electronically if possible, and choose doorstep drop off options. If you are picking up groceries, it's recommended that you stay in your vehicle and have the trunk open and empty for store staff.

Disinfect Items: When you bring the groceries inside, disinfect the counters and follow the same process as above. For takeout orders, choose the contactless delivery option. Wipe down the bag and the food containers before you start to eat. Transfer food to a plate or bowl instead of eating out of the container, use your own cutlery, and wash your hands in between each step.

Below you will find several grocery and food delivery companies operating in the greater Toronto area.

Grocery Delivery

[Grocery Gateway](#)

[Instacart](#)

[Fresh City Farms](#)

[Inabuggy](#)

[Hello Fresh](#)

[Metro Online Grocery](#)

[Walmart Grocery](#)

[Food to You](#)

Restaurant Takeout & Delivery

[Uber Eats](#)

[DoorDash](#)

[Foodora](#)

[Toronto Restaurants offering Takeout & Delivery](#)

KITCHEN HACKS

Widespread flour and egg shortages are an indication that people are experimenting in the kitchen during this period of self-isolation and whether that's because of stress-baking, boredom, or stockpiling, you may be unable to get items on your shopping list, which makes meal planning a little more complicated. Below you will find kitchen tips to make the most out of what you have.



Make Food Last Longer: With health officials recommending one trip to the grocery store each week or every two weeks, you might be stocking up on fresh fruits and vegetables, only to watch them spoil and be wasted. Try these [simple tricks to make your produce last longer](#), like keeping unripe bananas on the counter and then moving them to the fridge once they ripen. Or freezing fresh spinach for smoothies, pasta sauces and soups. [Some fruits last for months refrigerated](#) in the produce drawer, such as apples, while more perishable fruits like bananas and berries, freeze well. Make sure your refrigerator is set to the [right temperature](#) (ideally at or below 40 degrees F) and the freezer should be set to 0 degrees F, this will ensure fewer bacteria on your food, helping perishable items last as long as possible. The back of the fridge will always be colder than the door, so put items like milk towards the back and condiments like mayonnaise on the door shelves.



Telltale Food Spoilage Signs: Know the difference between “use by” and “best if used by” date labels. If you have boxed food in your cupboard and the “best if used by” date has passed, don't throw it out. These dates simply mean the food may not be at peak freshness, but are still fine to eat. “Use by” date labels typically appear on perishable items such as meat and dairy products and are for your safety, so follow those accordingly. For eggs with a recently expired date, drop the egg in a glass of water, if it sinks, it's still safe to eat. If the egg floats, it has gone bad.



Substitute Ingredients: If you're missing an ingredient, try visiting [The Cook's Thesaurus](#) or [All Recipes](#) to find a suitable substitute that you can use in your recipe.



Prepare Pantry Meals: You may be stuck staring in your fridge or pantry, wondering what to make with the random ingredients you were able to get from the store and are having trouble coming up with new master chef recipes. [My Fridge Food](#), [My Recipes](#), [Super Cook](#), and [Yummly](#) will suggest recipes that include ingredients you have on hand.



Make-Ahead Freezer Meals: You may have an abundance of ingredients, but don't want to eat the same meal for the next seven days. Making a large batch of meals that freeze well will come in handy when you run out of dinner options, try these [kid-friendly freezer meals](#).



Use Your Slow Cooker: Try using a slow cooker to prepare soups and stews, they're forgiving in flavour when you can't use the freshest ingredients and can stretch ingredients into several portions. Most slow cooker recipes also freeze well for up to 2-3 months in an airtight container. You can set it and forget it and dinner will be ready at the end of the workday. Try any of these great [Crock Pot recipes](#) and freeze the leftovers.



Get Creative: Don't waste your scraps. Vegetable scraps with water and seasoning can be turned into [vegetable stock](#) for soups and stews or green onion ends [can be grown into new vegetables](#).



Sharpen Your Cooking Skills: With the extra time on your hands, maybe you're looking to learn a new cooking skill or how to make a special recipe. [A cooking class](#) is a great way to entertain yourself, pick up a new skill, and maybe socialize while you're at it. The [Food Network Kitchen](#) offers live cooking classes from celebrity chefs and [Skill Share](#) offers two months of free classes on everything from [knife skills 101](#) to [making fresh Italian pasta](#).