

Social Distancing and Grocery Shopping

In the face of the terrible pandemic of COVID-19, limiting personal and social contacts (social distancing) must be the "law of the land." Social distancing, of course, means not having physical contact with anybody unless it's the family with whom you live. It means not going out. It means staying at least 6 feet away from folks if you do go out.

How then are we supposed to shop for groceries? I will try to answer that question with as much scientific background as possible. Then I will suggest ways to handle the groceries themselves.

Social distancing does allow for us to go out to shop for groceries. But there are some rules that must govern our shopping behaviors. The first of these is: if you are "immunocompromised" then don't go out. Immunocompromised means you have some kind of debilitating illness or condition, or it means you are older. The reason is that if you become infected and you are immunocompromised, you may become more ill than usual. Indeed you have a higher chance of dying. Make somebody else do your shopping.

The second rule is: don't go out if you're sick. The reason is that you might have a contagious disease that you don't want to give to anybody, including the COVID-19.

Here are a bunch of more rules:

- Since the less exposure to others who might be infected the better, you should shop rarely and in quantity (but do not hoard!).
- You should make a careful list of what you need.
- Promise yourself that you won't linger to do impulse shopping. Get in and get out of the store as fast as you can.
- Avoid crowds in the store, so choose your timing to shop when there might be fewer people. If you come across a crowded aisle, circle back when it is less crowded.
- If someone is coughing and sneezing, avoid them. If they do cough or sneeze 6 feet from you, hold your breath and walk away.
- Masks are a good idea. (See my separate thoughts about masks.)

And more rules:

- Bring a bleach soaked rag in a baggie or bring alcohol wipes to sanitize the shopping cart handle and any surfaces that you think you need to clean.
- Bring your own pen in case you need to sign something.
- Bring hand sanitizer, if you have it, and use it frequently. Some stores are supplying hand sanitizers, so use them.
- And keep your hands away from your face!
- Consider using the self check out line, which is probably better for social distancing.
- There is probably no great value in using gloves.

Now, what do you do with the groceries when you get home? Here are some reassuring points to begin with. It is true that research has shown the novel coronavirus to survive on plastic and stainless steel surfaces up to three days and on cardboard up to one day. But the risk of obtaining the virus from surfaces of food containers or food itself is probably negligible. That is because the number of viral particles there is probably low to begin with, and also the number decays exponentially over a period of hours. In fact, there is as yet no scientific evidence of transmission of the virus from containers or food itself in this fashion.

Nevertheless, you may want to be as safe as possible. If so, here are more rules:

- Wash your hands for 20 seconds as soon as you get home.
- Wipe down any containers with a disinfectant solution, dilute bleach or alcohol wipes.
- Wash fruits and vegetables under running water, but do not use cleaning products on their surfaces - they are bad for your belly.
- After processing the groceries in this way, wipe down the countertops on which you've been working with a disinfectant.
- Then wash your hands for 20 seconds.
- And keep your hands away from your face!

Finally, you should know that some stores are accepting telephone or email orders for food. Some stores then make your package available at their door. Other stores even deliver. Current information suggests that local Hannafords have a call-in "Hannaford-to-go" service, which involves a customer pick-up at Hannaford's door. There is a small surcharge for the service. Local Price Choppers have something similar called an "Instacart," but with delivery to your door. There is also a small surcharge. Call your store or visit their websites, and check out their services.

Be safe, and keep in touch - from a distance.

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