

Shopping Safety During the COVID-19 Pandemic

During these unprecedented times, shopping for life's essentials takes some planning, a little creativity and definitely precaution to limit you and your family's risk of exposure to novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

And as stores begin restricting the number of people allowed inside at one time, there's one more thing shopping requires during these times: patience.

"It's not a family trip. It's not a family outing. You never know who you're going to come into contact with, so the person who could be shopping an aisle over, or in the same aisle as you could have COVID and you don't know it. So you want to take a safe stance, and you just want it to be limited to one person from the household," Lori Grooms, director of Prevention Control for OSF HealthCare reminded.

And planning is vital, Grooms said. She suggests having a plan in place before you go shopping: know what you need and try to shop for about a two week time frame, to limit the number of necessary trips total.

"Every time you go that's one increased exposure, and we want to make sure that we're able to end social distancing as fast as we can," she explained. "The only way we can do that is to stay at home, only go to work if it's necessary, and to make sure that all of our contacts out in the public are within a distance."

After you load your groceries into the car you should wipe down your hands or use hand sanitizer. Also, when you get home and unload your groceries, Grooms suggests washing your hands thoroughly before unpacking your bags, and once more after everything is put away.

However, as for the groceries themselves, she says it's not necessary to disinfect every item you purchase.

"Go ahead and put your groceries away. We don't have to wash everything as we put it away. The CDC recommends that it's a very low risk," said Grooms. "Once you've cooked your food there should be no risk of it being spread through food, but your fresh foods. You want to make sure you wash those. So as you take them out, wash them before you put them in the refrigerator. But after you're done putting your groceries away, clean your hands."

Grooms hopes diligent hand hygiene lasts beyond this "new normal" we all are experiencing in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I hope that hand hygiene, and making sure we're cleaning our fresh fruits and vegetables, and making sure we are cooking food to the right temperature and washing our hands as we prepare food, I hope that becomes what we just normally do," she said.

Tips for shopping in the 'new normal'

Grooms and other sources, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration, offer the following tips for shopping during these times:

- If you are able to, order your groceries to be picked up or have them delivered to your home to limit your exposure.
- If you do go to the grocery store, practice social distancing by keeping six feet between you and others.
- If you have to go out, the CDC now recommends wearing a cloth mask in public settings where social distancing can be difficult to maintain, such as in grocery stores or pharmacies.
- Shop at non-peak times, and go solo.
- Keep your phone in your pocket or leave it at home and rely on a paper grocery list.
- Perform hand hygiene by wiping down the grocery cart with a disinfecting wipe (Hint: make a small packet of wipes using a zip-top bag so you have them on hand in case the store is out of wipes by the carts). Clean your hands with the wipe and throw it away.
- Use hand sanitizer often as you make your way through the store getting the things on your list.
- When checking out, keep your distance from the clerk to protect you both. Use one of your home-packaged wipes to touch the pin pad when paying with plastic.
- After loading everything in your vehicle, wipe down your hands and apply hand sanitizer before touching the steering wheel.
- When you get home and unload your groceries, wash your hands thoroughly before unpacking your bags.
- The CDC does not recommend wiping down each grocery item once you're home, but clean your hands again after unpacking the groceries.
- Clean the kitchen surfaces you touched during the unpacking, including countertops, cabinet handles, refrigerator and freezer handles and any light switches.
- Wash fruits and vegetables like you normally would.