

## Beef • Pork • Chicken: Journey to Your Plate

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. **Can animals catch COVID-19 from the farmers?** Farmers care about the health and safety of their animals beyond all else. Modern cattle, pig and chicken barns embrace stringent hygiene practices to keep their animals healthy. Farmers also work directly with veterinarians to continuously monitor herd health and implement preventative measures to fight the potential for disease. While animals can get sick with illnesses specific to their species, COVID-19 has not been shown to impact pigs, chickens or cows. But more importantly, farmers have had robust health and safety measures in place to protect their animals for years, including stringent practices, like restricting visitors to farms, showering in and out of barns and other measures to ensure the safety of their herds and flocks.

2. **Is my meat safe? I hear workers in the plants have been sick. Can the workers at a processing plant transfer the virus to my pork, beef or chicken?** According to multiple health and safety organizations worldwide, including the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), the [United States Department of Agriculture](#), and the [European Food Safety Authority](#), there is currently no evidence that COVID-19 has spread through food or food packaging, however, it is always important to follow the four key steps of food safety: [clean, separate, cook, and chill](#). Processing plants have stringent cleanliness and food safety rules as well as well-defined procedures to keep their employees and you safe. Some of those safety measures include installing barriers between workers, requiring face masks and gloves, among other things. USDA inspectors work tirelessly every day, at every plant, to monitor procedures and test for safety.

Ensuring that workers are healthy and safe, to protect them as well as ensure safe meat and poultry products, is the reason some plants have temporarily closed. These closings have enabled processing plants to implement deep cleaning and retrofit lines. Some facilities are bringing healthcare workers on site to monitor employee wellness and keep a sharp eye out for potential COVID-19 symptoms.

3. **Can I catch COVID-19 from my beef, pork or chicken?** We all want to make sure our food is safe for ourselves and our families. A combination of food quality controls in meat and poultry production, as well as consumer best handling practices, help ensure that happens. Each meat processing facility follows stringent health and safety protocols that have been heightened during the pandemic. In addition, USDA inspectors work in every processing plant to monitor and confirm required safety protocols are followed.

The USDA is unaware of any incidences of COVID-19 transmission through food or food packaging. Having said that, best practices call for washing of hands before and after handling raw meat. This is the same as before COVID-19.



There is other good news related to meat and poultry safety. As a consumer, through proper cooking and safe handling practices, you have the ability to help ensure the safety of the foods you eat. COVID-19 does not like heat. Cooking meat to recommended cooking temperatures and following safe handling practices like hand washing will help keep you and your family safe.

**4. Why are the meat cases sometimes empty at the grocery store?** It can be so frustrating to arrive at the grocery store only to find that the things you need are out of stock. Since COVID-19 hit, that has been the case with many items, including meat. Livestock and poultry farmers have full barns of healthy cattle, chickens and hogs to feed a hungry world, but the current challenge centers around two things. The first is worker safety against the illness and the second is the supply chain and distribution structure, which could never have anticipated the sudden changes brought on by a global pandemic.

Worker and food safety sit top of mind for America's processing facilities. In these plants, employees normally work in close proximity to one another, making social distancing a challenge. With the objective of keeping people safe, plants have shut down to conduct deep cleaning as well as make changes and adjustments that protect the people who work hard every day to feed our families. Actions taken include increased sanitation measures, protective equipment, social distancing measures, health checks and physical changes to the plants such as installing barriers between workers.

The U.S. supply chain remains the most efficient in the world. Under normal circumstances, it runs very smoothly, delivering safe, affordable and wholesome meat products through a highly efficient supply chain. Approximately 5.5 million people in beef, pork and poultry production feed 326 million Americans as well as vast populations around the globe. Everything they produce funnels into 835 livestock processing plants for beef and pork and 3,000 poultry processing plants. These facilities harvest and process the animals into meat products like hamburger, bacon and chicken breasts. Even though our farmers are producing lots of beef, pork and chicken, the plant closures have created a bottleneck that impacts what's available for consumers at the grocery store.

Additionally, where people dine has shifted dramatically since the advent of COVID-19. According to USDA, prior to COVID-19, 33 percent of daily calorie consumption was consumed away from home. This means consumers were eating at restaurants, schools, shopping malls, movie theaters and more. Suddenly, people stopped going to these places and began eating at home. The cuts of meat, packaging quantities and logistics for grocery stores are vastly different from those for schools or restaurants. It's difficult to shift the entire system so quickly. But rest assured, the food system is resilient and will catch up.

**Why do some stores have meat when other stores don't?** Grocery stores are adjusting to significantly increased demand all while their storage capabilities and distribution systems are trying to catch up. In some cases, daily need for meat at a grocery store can be five times its normal demand. Meanwhile, their distribution and storage capabilities were created to satisfy a different



type of demand. Each grocery store or big box chain has its own network of suppliers and its own distribution chain. They are all working hard to keep shelves stocked and customers satisfied while planning for the changes consumers will need moving forward.

**5. Should I stock up? How long will we have shortages?** The U.S. meat and poultry supply is the most robust in the world and U.S. cold storage facilities are full. It's natural for people to want to stock up to ensure that their families have enough tasty, high-quality protein to enjoy during uncertain times. But the ability of farmers to produce remains strong. The industry is ironing out the challenges from the supply chain and experts such as USDA recommend purchasing normal quantities, which will enable everyone to continue to enjoy the goodness of meat.

**6. Shouldn't we stop shipping beef, pork and chicken overseas since we need that meat here in the U.S.?** It's natural to want to make sure our folks in the U.S. are fed first. While it may seem like we have shortages here in the U.S., most of the absence of some meat products on grocery store shelves is related to temporary processing bottlenecks or distribution challenges because of changes to consumer eating patterns. Many of the beef, pork and chicken products we ship overseas are products consumers in the U.S. are not interested in eating. For example, tongue, tripe (beef stomach), and chicken paws (chicken feet and claws) are relished favorites in other areas of the world, but not as commonly consumed in the U.S. So, exporting meat and poultry products helps ensure no parts of the animal go to waste.

**7. Can't all the meat just be frozen and stored?** Cold storage facilities around the country do store meat and poultry for shipping later to grocery stores, restaurants, schools and other buyers. The system is designed to move meat and poultry into cold storage, then out quickly to satisfy demand. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted that flow by reducing meat processing plant capacity as processors strive to protect worker safety, and by sharply shifting demand to grocery stores, from restaurants, schools and other outlets. This disruption has overwhelmed capacity in our cold storage facilities, which are now full.

**8. Why is this (mass euthanasia) happening?** The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting everyone, everywhere throughout our country and the world. Our food system is no different. Farmers and others throughout our food system have been working diligently to protect worker health while looking for creative ways to accomplish the essential tasks that need to be done on farms and in processing plants. Meat and poultry processing facilities have limited their capacity to match the number of available employees who can safely work in each area. In some cases, processors completely closed for the health of their people. These changes had significant impact on all the farmers and ranchers who raise livestock.

Unlike some food, pigs or poultry cannot be placed in storage and processed when plants are open again. The closure of plants has created significant stress in the market and on farms where now some gut-wrenching decisions, like the euthanasia of animals, will be made. This is a devastating decision of last resort for farmers who have looked for a variety of innovative ways to maintain



animal health and welfare amidst significant food system disruption. At some point though, emergency depopulation becomes necessary to prevent overcrowding and ensure humane treatment.

**9. How can you claim this is the humane/best/only option when (hundreds or thousands) of animals are being killed?** These difficult decisions are being made by livestock farmers who have dedicated their lives to caring for and raising animals. Some are now faced with making an unthinkable decision. COVID-19 has impacted every person everywhere. The fact that hundreds of processing plant workers have been impacted means these essential individuals are unable to come to work as they focus on regaining their health.

With processing capacity dramatically reduced, farmers are running out of space to keep the animals on the farm without risking overcrowding that negatively impacts animal welfare. When that happens, the most humane course of action is euthanasia. When on-farm euthanasia is the only remaining option, farmers are following guidelines established by veterinarians to assure animals are euthanized humanely.

Throughout this pandemic, essential workers throughout the food system have and will remain committed to providing a safe, healthy food supply while focusing on human and animal health.

**10. Isn't there some way these animals can be used to feed the hungry?** Many of us have a passion for hunger relief, and farmers would like nothing more than to have the milk, meat, poultry and eggs they produce feed all those in need. In fact, since the Coronavirus crisis, pork producers and processors have donated more than 14 million pounds, or 56 million servings of pork, \$4 million dollars in cash as well as personal protective equipment (PPE) to those in need.

Those in agriculture have been long-time partners with food banks and organizations focused on alleviating hunger and providing donations to serve neighbors in need. Because of increased social distancing measures in processing plants, as well as complications with essential workers becoming infected by the Coronavirus, there is simply not enough capacity in plants to process all the animals that farmers have raised.

**11. Why don't the farmers just give the animals away?** There is simply not enough processing capacity due to partial plant closures or shutdowns from COVID-19 to process all the animals to give away. The quantity of animals is far beyond what could be given away to individuals. This is absolutely devastating for farmers. Furthermore, most local processing facilities are scheduled for months in advance to process individual orders. People working throughout the industry are dedicated to delivering a consistent supply of food to people around world.

**13. When will things go back to "normal?"** We're all looking for some normalcy and predictability in this time of unprecedented change. It's safe to say that we're adapting through things like grocery delivery, touchless food service and prepackaged fresh fruits and vegetables. The good news is,



when it comes to our meat supply, farmers and the industry are committed to providing safe, healthy food choices. The supply chain for beef, pork and chicken will adjust. Production will normalize to changing consumer demands, and tasty, high-quality meat and poultry products will be abundantly available for your enjoyment.

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