

# Recommendations to Prevent COVID-19 Transmission at Food Fairs and Markets



# PAHO



Pan American  
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## **Recommendations to Prevent COVID-19 Transmission at Food Fairs and Markets**

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# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health crisis that has also caused an economic and social crisis that puts the population's food security at risk (1).

Approximately 700 million people or nearly 9% of the world's population are going hungry: 60 million more people than five years ago. In terms of the distribution of moderate or severe food insecurity, 205 million people are in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 88 million are in North America and Europe (2). Prior to the pandemic, 42.5 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean did not have the nutrients they needed to lead a healthy and active life (3).

Several United Nations agencies have expressed the need to keep the food system operating—activities that range from food production, processing, and distribution to marketing and sales—in order to

prevent hunger and the increased consumption of ultra-processed and low-nutrition foods.

Local markets are an important source of food for the entire population, but especially for those with few resources and living in conditions of vulnerability. For this sector of the population, municipal markets are also an important source of job creation. These establishments are highly valued by the community as less expensive places to shop, often attended by the producers themselves. They tend to have short supply chains and offer a wide variety of vegetables, fruits, nuts, legumes, fish, and eggs, among other foods. In addition, they are usually family businesses, often passed on from generation to generation, so owners typically express a strong emotional bond that goes beyond their profits (3-5).



The crisis caused by the pandemic has reduced access to fresh foods such as fruits and vegetables, due to restrictions on local fairs and markets where people purchase these products, coupled with restrictions on transportation and mobility, among other factors. Limiting the number of outings to buy food encourages the purchase of non-perishable, often ultra-processed products, with negative effects on the nutritional quality of a person's diet. Ultra-processed products were already very attractive before the pandemic because they are cheap and widely available, so people with less income and more difficulty accessing healthy food may increase their consumption of those products in this new situation (6-12).

Food markets vary greatly depending on local culture, socioeconomic conditions, the variety of products available, and food preferences. At the same time, food markets are places where diseases can spread, as happened with cholera in Latin America and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in Asia, and as is now occurring with COVID-19, given its known routes of transmission. For example, markets in the city of Lima have been associated with a higher incidence of COVID-19 and related mortality, and this association remains after adjusting for population density (7). In a study in the United States of America in which 104 essential workers in the retail grocery business—whose job conditions are similar to those of fair workers—received a reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) test, 20% were found positive for SARS-CoV-2. In total, 76% of them were asymptomatic and those who worked directly with consumers were five times more likely to test positive for the disease (8).

The concern is that local retail market networks are a source of exposure because they concentrate a large

number of workers and consumers. For example, in Chile in 2016, 1,114 fairs were registered in a national census, with a total of 113,112 stalls (166 stalls per fair, on average), 340,000 workers, and more than two million shoppers on a normal pre-pandemic weekend (9). A previous study on Chile, published in 2013 by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), reported that fairs are an important source of work, with 66,500 points of sale generating 197,000 jobs nationwide (10). In Mexico City, the 72,000 stallholders in the public markets network employ approximately 250,000 people (11). Mexico's first national census of wholesale food markets (2012) identified 89 wholesale food markets in the country (12). A 2016 census of food markets in Peru established that there were 2,612 in the country. In total, 47.2% (1,232) of the country's markets are concentrated in the province of Lima, and 15.3% (399) are in the provinces of Arequipa, Junín, and La Libertad. The same census reported that 9,317 people were working in the administration of food markets nation-wide; 77.9% of them were men (13). It is therefore essential to have protocols in place for these links in the food chain (and to enforce them) in order to protect the health of the general population and also the health of fair workers and shoppers.

All food markets and food fairs have one thing in common: they provide the community with access to nutritious food. For this reason, the World Health Organization developed a guide for the progressive improvement of these spaces in order to foster a business culture aligned with healthy eating and other community needs. This is also a great opportunity for practical education on a number of health-related issues for sellers and buyers alike, since markets play a social role in the exchange of ideas and knowledge (14).

# Methodology

To develop this handbook, a search of the scientific and technical literature was carried out on PubMed, Google, and the websites of international and governmental agencies. Keywords were selected in English and Spanish, with no limit on publication dates. The words used were: “*ferias alimentos*” AND “covid”, “*mercados*” AND “covid”, “food market” AND “covid”, “fresh market” AND “covid”, “farmers market” AND “covid”, “food safety” AND “covid”, and “*recomendaciones ferias*” AND “covid”.

In addition, experiences from Latin American countries such as Chile, Mexico, and Peru were reviewed through

direct contacts, news media, scientific publications, and information from international organizations, in order to learn about food markets and food fairs and how the system has been operating during the pandemic. Finally, various current recommendations for the safe operation of food fairs and markets in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (issued by local and other government entities, international organizations, etc.) were reviewed and organized according to the different actors involved (national and local authorities, market and fair workers, and users of these public spaces).





# Target Audience

This handbook is aimed at decision-makers in the public and private spheres, technical teams and policy makers at the central government level and, in particular,

local governments (municipalities, districts, etc.), with special concern for workers, distributors, and users of food fairs and markets.





# Purpose

The purpose of this handbook is to contribute to the safe functioning of food fairs and markets during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a PAHO initiative to address concerns about the need to establish recommendations to reduce transmission of the SARS-Cov-2 virus, so that food fairs and markets are safe for workers, distributors, and shoppers during the pandemic.

In terms of scope, this handbook covers the spaces where fresh, natural foods are bought and sold, coming mostly from small-scale agricultural producers, ranchers, and fishers. The products they sell include vegetables, fruits, seeds, legumes, eggs, and artisanal cheeses, among others. Each country and territory has a term for

them; for example, in Argentina they are called *ferias itinerantes* (traveling fairs), *ferias municipales* (municipal fairs), *ferias de la economía social* (social economy fairs), and *ferias de la economía popular* (popular economy fairs); in Chile, *ferias libres* (open fairs) and *mercados* (markets); in Colombia, *centros de abastos* (food supply centers), *mercados campesinos* (farmers' markets) and *plazas de mercado* (marketplaces); in Cuba, *feria de alimentos* (food fairs) and *mercaditos* (little markets); in Honduras, *ferias del agricultor* (farmers' fairs); in Mexico, *tianguis* and *mercados de abasto* (food markets); in Peru, *de la chacra a la olla* (farm to pot); and in Uruguay, *ferias vecinales* (neighborhood fairs), *ferias agroecológicas* (agro-ecological fairs), or simply *ferias* and *mercados*.



# Recommendations to Prevent COVID-19 Infection at Food Fairs and Markets in Latin America

The Latin American Federation of Supply Markets (FLAMA) has established a joint strategy with FAO to monitor and publicize the activities of regional wholesale markets and food supply centers during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. This is an opportunity to share recommendations and success stories (15, 16). For its part, the International Labor Organization recently shared different measures that have been taken against the pandemic in markets and fairs in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Spain (Barcelona). The participants from the markets in the region highlighted the great resilience of the system and the extraordinary actions taken to keep food markets and fairs running. They stressed “the need to build a new and better normal after the pandemic” (17-18).

Many different actions have been taken to contain the spread of COVID-19 in food fairs and markets in Latin America. For example, in Mexico City, fairs were seen as essential services. In several markets, home delivery was added at no cost, and the population was invited to continue shopping in these markets. It was recommended that customers and stallholders constantly use hand sanitizer, especially before and after receiving cash or returning change; also, disinfection campaigns were carried out in public facilities such as toilets and sidewalks, in addition to periodic fumigations by the authorities. At the same time, approximately 430 health promoters carry out daily activities to detect suspected cases, using

questionnaires. In Chile, the Government has provided good practice guidelines, training recommendations, public information leaflets, and a protocol for COVID-19 management and prevention in fairs, as part of the National COVID Lifestyle Protocol: *Step by step, we take care of ourselves*. This protocol establishes mandatory basic rules for coexistence and disease prevention in the pandemic context. In addition, local authorities have ordered that fairs must be installed in stadiums and sports fields that provide more open, safer spaces, in order to control entries and maintain physical distancing (19). Something similar has happened in Peru, where itinerant food markets are now located in stadiums, parks, and other large outdoor spaces, operating only on scheduled days due to the pandemic. Some municipalities have restricted the entry of older adults and children to prevent infection; other protective measures include limited capacity, safety barriers, hand-washing stations at the entrance to markets, and the installation of public disinfection mechanisms at the entrance and exit gates (20, 21).

“The government must ensure that individuals, families, and the community as a whole have access at all times to sufficient safe and nutritious food, mainly produced in the country in conditions of competitiveness, sustainability, and equity, so that their consumption and biological use provides people with optimal nutrition for a healthy and socially productive life, while respecting cultural diversity and consumer preferences” (22).



The following recommendations are based on scientific evidence and aimed at preventing the spread of the virus among workers and visitors to food markets and fairs, and on the guidelines issued by countries and international agencies for the safe operation of food fairs and markets. Actions to facilitate the organization, coordination, and implementation of the various recommended measures have been considered, as well as aspects of social protection applicable to all workers.

With this premise, tables 1 to 4 present recommendations to prevent COVID-19 infection in food fairs and markets, with four areas of responsibility and action:

1. Recommendations for national and local authorities, emphasizing actions related to the organization and coordination of measures, and the preparation needed in order for the most specific recommendations to be effective both for markets and users.
2. Recommendations on the physical space of fairs and the organization of food markets. These focus on actions to be carried out in the physical spaces where fairs and markets operate, so that they have the necessary conditions to implement the recommendations for workers and users of these facilities.
3. Recommendations for workers in food fairs and markets, related to everyday prevention and protection measures in these facilities.
4. Recommendations for users of food markets and fairs.



**TABLE 1. Recommendations for national and local authorities**

Area	Recommendations
<b>Intersectorality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convene and coordinate the various actors involved in the food supply chain in order to form, for example, an intersectoral emergency committee. This committee should consist of at least: the productive sector (farmers, fishers, and industry stakeholders), businesses (markets and fairs), the public sector (ministries of health, agriculture, and social development), academia, and international bodies. These working groups or committees should be convened at both the national and local levels in order to receive general recommendations and analyze territorial specificities</li> <li>• Declare the activities of fairs as essential services in order to keep circuits open and ensure that the food system continues to function smoothly.</li> </ul>
<b>Situation assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comprehensive assessment of the access and availability of food at the national and territorial levels. The authorities should know the location of fairs and markets in the country, which ones are currently operating or have been suspended, and what local governments require in order for them to continue operations under the recommended conditions.</li> <li>• Determine the related structural and economic changes needed for implementation of the optimal health measures; geographical, social, cultural and economic differences in each territory should be considered.</li> <li>• It is recommended to have a map and information sheet for each (formal or informal) fair in each territory, including number of stalls, size, dates and hours of operation, mobility within the territory, place of residence of fair workers, and main products sold, among other data. It is important to engage in intersectoral work to ensure that stallholders agree on the contents of the map and information sheet. This constitutes the basic information used to formulate the action plan.</li> </ul>
<b>Participatory action plan</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop an intersectoral action plan to address the risk of infection, crowding, cases, and other emerging situations, in a coordinated and integrated manner that involves different sectors and administrative levels.</li> <li>• Develop and implement national and local emergency resolutions and regulations to ensure access to and availability of food; and define mechanisms for full compliance with the provisions by all parties.</li> <li>• Help to avoid decisions that unnecessarily threaten the operation of markets and fairs (e.g., preventive closures); instead, support adjustments that will allow them to remain open safely.</li> <li>• Monitor and enforce compliance with the agreed and established measures.</li> <li>• The action plan should consider the social protection of workers in fairs and markets. They may be self-employed or informal workers and this may be a barrier to compliance with the measures, especially in the case of illness or contact with COVID-19 that leads to loss of work.</li> </ul>
<b>Training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Together with specialized entities, organize the training of authorities and key players in markets and fairs: a process in which everyone contributes their knowledge and skills, and helps monitor compliance with the measures put in place.</li> </ul>
<b>Communication and risk perception</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a funded communications strategy and plan that informs stakeholders and the public and enables them to be part of proposed solutions.</li> <li>• The communications plan should be adapted as the pandemic evolves.</li> <li>• It is necessary to conduct permanent campaigns on COVID-19 prevention—including measures to safely visit markets and fairs—, using mass media as well as digital media platforms, social networks, ad hoc development of educational material, and posters and information leaflets that can be posted at fairs and markets.</li> </ul>
<b>Public messaging</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form a group of specialists in communications, public health, and food security.</li> <li>• Prepare and disseminate appropriate messages and recommendations to prevent rumors and misinformation.</li> <li>• Deliver reliable information to all actors involved.</li> <li>• Adapt messages and formats to each audience, especially audiences with special needs, while considering cultural contexts.</li> <li>• It is important that, in all their public appearances, authorities repeat public recommendations aimed at preventing SARS-CoV-2 transmission and that their actions be consistent with the recommendations.</li> <li>• Engage the community through participatory dialogue. Communication of health risks should include open, inclusive, constructive, and deliberative collaboration between government, workers, and the public.</li> </ul>
<b>Features of strong messaging</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concise: Do not overload messages with information. People often have difficulty retaining and remembering large amounts of information when they feel scared or anxious about a particular disease.</li> <li>• Clear and positive: Avoid messages with ambiguous or negative language.</li> <li>• Personalized messages: Using personal pronouns helps lends credibility and helps people identify with the message. "We are committed to..." or "We understand the need for..."</li> <li>• Simple language: The use of technical jargon or complex scientific concepts creates communication barriers.</li> <li>• Avoid speculation or value judgments: Stick to the facts and avoid moral judgments.</li> </ul>

Sources: See the list of sources at the end of the document.



**TABLE 2. Recommendations for food fairs and markets**

Area	Recommendations
<b>Operations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restrict access and define differentiated schedules for specific populations (e.g., older adults) to protect them and prevent crowding.</li> <li>• Control the entry of cargo vehicles and cars.</li> <li>• Adjust hours of operation to prevent crowding.</li> <li>• Ensure that vulnerable workers and members of risk groups are exempted from participating in fairs, for example through paid leave for absence.</li> <li>• Request that workers in fairs and markets agree to comply with the established measures.</li> <li>• Establish markets or fairs in large spaces where it is possible to comply with distancing measures (e.g., stadiums, sports centers, sports fields, etc.).</li> <li>• If stalls are set up in the streets, ensure that there is more than one meter between each one in order to comply with prevention measures.</li> <li>• Avoid having stalls on both sides of a street in order to accommodate the flow of people and maintain proper physical distancing.</li> <li>• Avoid setting up markets and fairs in enclosed places in order to prevent the generation of aerosols in crowds of people.</li> <li>• Arrange one-way movement of people; i.e., have the entrance on one side and the exit on another, and do not allow people to back up as they move along.</li> <li>• Monitoring compliance with the measures.</li> </ul>
<b>Hygiene</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequently clean and disinfect high-contact surfaces in common areas (entrances, corridors, and bathrooms, etc.).</li> <li>• Promote self-care measures among sellers and customers: By taking care of myself, I'm also taking care of you.</li> <li>• Promote hygiene in the vehicles of fair workers (e.g., vans, trucks, cars) in order to protect fair workers.</li> <li>• Have alcohol-based hand sanitizer for fair workers and visitors.</li> <li>• Set up hand hygiene stations with the necessary supplies for visitors and workers (e.g., soap and water).</li> <li>• Ensure that there are sufficient toilets equipped with toilet paper, soap, and water. Toilets should be cleaned on a regular basis (ideally every hour).</li> <li>• Keep enclosed spaces as ventilated as possible; open doors and windows for air to circulate.</li> <li>• Regulate capacity in order to allow a at least 1.5 m between people inside the fair or market..</li> </ul>

Sources: See the list of sources at the end of the document.



**TABLE 3. Recommendations for workers in food fairs and markets**

Area	Recommendations
<b>Organizing the response</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organize the management of the fair or market with local and national authorities.</li> <li>• Coordinate access to training for authorities and supervisors.</li> <li>• Prepare a plan for disseminating information in the market or fair.</li> <li>• Assess structural and functional needs.</li> <li>• Create and maintain a surveillance system for compliance with regulations in each market or fair.</li> <li>• Avoid crowding (visitors and sellers).</li> </ul>
<b>Hygiene</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage greeting without physical contact.</li> <li>• Avoid touching your face.</li> <li>• Use your mask correctly, so that it fits over your nose and mouth. Do not remove it during the work day and do not handle or touch it.</li> <li>• Do not share personal protective equipment.</li> <li>• When sneezing or coughing, do so in the fold of the arm (elbow area) or on toilet paper or a disposable tissue. Ensure there is an accessible place to dispose of paper and tissues.</li> <li>• Practice frequent hand hygiene with soap and water or alcohol-based sanitizers.</li> <li>• If you have respiratory or other symptoms compatible with COVID-19, you should not attend work and should seek medical attention to have the necessary tests and receive preventive guidance.</li> <li>• Take the necessary precautions on the way to work and back, especially if you use public transport or travel with coworkers: maintain physical distance, wear a mask if it is not possible to maintain physical distance, clean your hands frequently, avoid touching your face, and avoid (as much as possible) touching surfaces that may be contaminated.</li> <li>• Observe precautions during breaks or meals: maintain a distance of more than one meter; wash your hands before and after eating; choose open areas for eating; and do not share hygiene items or food.</li> </ul>
<b>Customer care</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prevent customers from having direct access to products to prevent handling.</li> <li>• Use prepackaged bags and plastic wrapping, and prepare boxes containing certain products (e.g., the most common weekly shopping items).</li> <li>• Try to make transactions without direct contact.</li> <li>• Keep at least 1.5 m away from customers and other workers.</li> </ul>

Sources: See the list of sources at the end of the document.





**TABLE 4. Recommendations for visitors to food markets and fairs.**

Area	Recommendations
Hygiene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greet people without physical contact.</li> <li>• Use your mask correctly, so that it fits over your nose and mouth. Do not remove it while shopping and do not handle or touch it.</li> <li>• Keep a physical distance of at least 1.5 m from other people.</li> <li>• Stay away from crowds.</li> <li>• Perform hand hygiene when entering and exiting the market.</li> </ul>
Organizing your shopping trip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare in advance a list of products to be purchased.</li> <li>• Try to buy enough for several days to help reduce crowds at markets and fairs.</li> <li>• Go grocery shopping alone.</li> <li>• Follow the instructions on one-way movement at the fair, as well as other related recommendations.</li> </ul>
Measures when shopping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid touching stalls, surfaces, and the people who serve you.</li> <li>• Avoid touching products; ask the seller to show you the product you require or select it for you.</li> <li>• Ensure that the seller is using personal protective items and that the stall is clean and sanitized.</li> </ul>

Sources: See the list of sources at the end of the document.



# Conclusions

The food security of the population is a priority that is even more important during a crisis. Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

Food markets and fairs are important actors in the food supply chain, helping to prevent food insecurity. Their safe operation is the responsibility of various actors that should be coordinated by the authorities through national and local intersectoral committees that make proposals and implement a joint action plan to prevent infection in these spaces and ensure that they continue to function.

Food markets and fairs present a major risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection and there is considerable evidence of highly infectious lethal outbreaks in the countries studied. These countries have developed recommendations to prevent infection in these places. Furthermore, the recommended measures are consistent across all countries and have proven to be highly effective in preventing transmission. However, there is no information about the degree of implementation of the proposed measures, which denotes an important problem: a lack of monitoring, enforcement, and feedback.

Another important difficulty that should be noted is that a large number of workers in fairs and markets are informally employed: the great majority are self-employed

or working without a labor contract. This raises the need to design social protection policies and programs for them, especially during the COVID-19 health crisis, since there is a risk that they will go to work even if they have the disease or are in contact with positive cases, since their income depends on doing so.

It is also important to note that shoppers and fair workers are willing to comply with the recommendations, but it takes resources, intersectoral coordination, and political will to implement all the recommendations, such as organizing the flow of people, adjusting hours of operation, expanding spaces, providing toilets and washing areas, addressing the need for inspectors, training community monitors, and developing effective risk communication strategies, among the most important considerations. Countries are invited to effectively strengthen the system in order to comply with protocols for the safe operation of food markets and fairs.

Finally, it is important to remember that food fairs and markets provide healthy food for the population and are a source of protection for people with health problems associated with unhealthy eating.

The COVID-19 post-pandemic period should be an opportunity to gather pandemic experiences, both good and bad, in order to strengthen food systems, make them healthier, more resilient, and more sustainable, and prevent future crises from putting them at risk.



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