UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA EXTENSION

MANAGING COVID-19 RISKS FOR POULTRY PROCESSING PLANTS PERSONNEL

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2. While this virus can cause human disease, there is no evidence it can cause disease to the birds (broilers and turkeys). Transmission of this virus is limited to person-to-person and to a small extent from inanimate objects such as equipment surfaces, clothing etc. and not thought to be from the birds to humans as in the case of Avian Influenza (AI). The risk of contamination of processing plant environment (food contact and non-food contact surfaces) and poultry products is high and primarily from infected persons. The most likely route of infection is due to virus transmission through moisture droplets (like spit and mucous) released through the air though speaking, yelling, coughing or sneezing . Person-to-person infection is thought to occur in poultry processing environments due to close proximity of workstations and the environment of the plan itself. One of the challenges for the poultry processing plant management is the reduction of healthy workforce in meat processing plants. Thus, risk management efforts should be directed towards preventing person-to-person transfer of the virus to avoid infections.

As suggested by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), social distancing is one of the primary strategies to prevent the spread of this virus. While the social distancing guidelines might seem feasible in outdoor settings, this can be a challenge in poultry processing operations, especially due to the number of employees working simultaneously in an enclosed environment. While the general population can stay at home to prevent the spread of the virus, food industry workers do not have that luxury as they are classified as essential critical infrastructure workers[1].

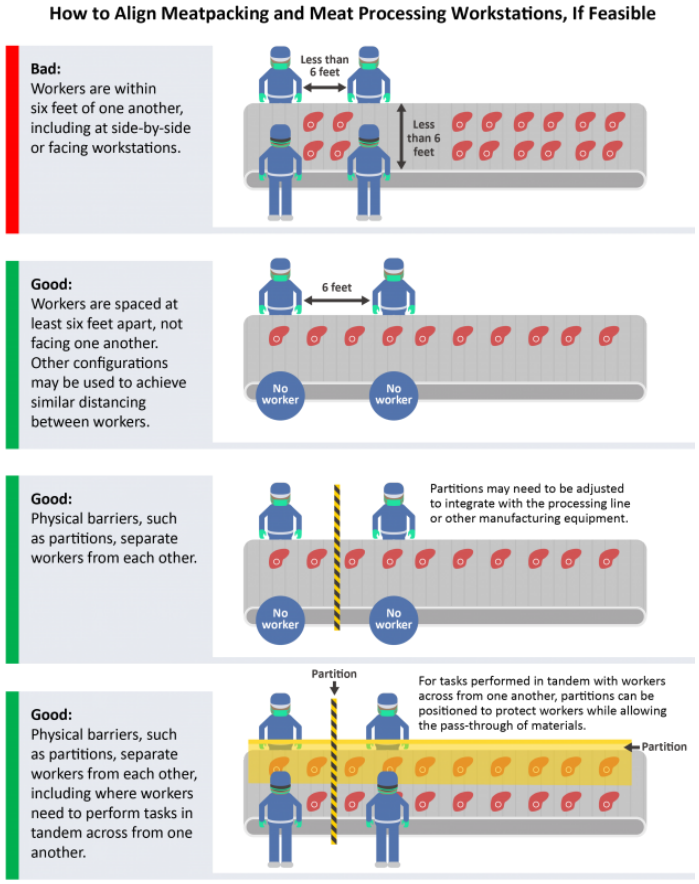

Image Source: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/images/community/meat-processing-workstations-medium.png

There is no definitive information and it is very unlikely that SARS-CoV-2 can spread via meat. There are several guidelines for control measures recommended by CDC to prevent SARS-CoV2 spread amongst employees in meat and poultry processing plants. Some require significant changes, while other control measures are already part of a food safety plan (such as GMPs) and can be modified to minimize the risk of COVID-19 spread among plant employees. It is prudent to assign qualified and trained individuals responsible for the implementation of any mitigation strategies designed for plant employees.

While states imposed shutdowns of normal operations, all meat and poultry processing plants continued to operate and must adjust operating procedures and the environment within plants to minimize the spread of SARS-CoV-2 through social and physical distancing, employee health

[1]https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Version_3.0_CISA_Guidance_on_Essential_Critical_Infrastructure_Workers_1.pdf

For more info, visit: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov

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screening and cleaning and disinfection. A critical challenge is that some asymptomatic or presymptomatic people can still spread the virus to others or contaminate the processing plant environment. In poultry processing plants social distancing of processing line workers is difficult. Tight processing lines, the cold environment, the physical nature of food processing, forced air and busy areas in the plant may contribute to potential spread of the virus. The virus is thought to spread mostly from person-to-person between people in close contact and respiratory droplets produced when the infected person speaks, coughs, or sneezes. Thus, the primary strategy to prevent the risk in processing plants is separation (i.e. social/physical distancing) and use of additional personal protective equipment (PPE) such as facemasks and/ or face shields. In addition, proper hand washing with soap and water, followed by use of hand sanitizers and employee education can help reduce the spread of the virus. Additional considerations about employee health policies, sick leave, communication about community spread outside the work environment should also be addressed.

Employee screening and paid sick leave can be useful in limiting in-plant and community spread. This can include temperature checks (preferably with non-contact thermometer such as infrared thermometers) or verbal questionnaire (in the employee's native language) before the start of the workday and entrance to the premises and providing information to self monitor staff and their families/social circle. Employees with temperatures above 100.4 °F, or who self-report illness including fever, chills, cough, or trouble breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, sore throat, and diarrhea in the past 24 hours should be sent home immediately. The employee's immediate supervisor and human resources should also be notified. Administrative controls such as encouraging symptomatic workers to stay home should be considered for successfully minimizing the exposure risk to healthy plant workers. Due to the potential for close contact by the screener to workers of unknown health status, it is critical that the screeners are provided with adequate and sufficient personal protective equipment to protect themselves from exposure, and to prevent the spread of the virus among workers. All screeners should be provided a mask as well as gloves (with enough to be changed between employees), aprons, and face shields if necessary. Additionally, washing your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and the use of hand sanitizers (at least 60% ethanol or 60% isopropanol) can prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2.

All facilities need to develop an action plan in the event an employee is confirmed COVID-19 positive. The actions include:

1. Disinfection of the ill employee's workstation, tools, and any areas or equipment with which the worker came in contact, but after a minimum 24-hour waiting period to minimize exposure to the cleaning crew[2] if feasible.
2. Employees or individuals potentially exposed to an ill person must be informed of their exposure in compliance with the Disabilities Act.
3. Potentially exposed employee(s) should self-isolate for 14 days after exposure to a COVID-19 positive worker, avoid immunocompromised or other high-risk individuals, and self-monitor for fever or shortness of breath[3].

[2] https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html
[3] https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/public-health-recommendations.html

For more info, visit: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov

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Reintegration of COVID-19 positive employees or employees with potential exposure to COVID-19 should follow the CDC's Discontinuation of Isolation for Persons with COVID -19 Not in Healthcare Settings interim guidance (See resources for more information).

1 Employees who previously tested positive for COVID-19 may return to work when they have been symptom free (resolution of fever, no coughing, shortness of breath, etc.) without the aid of medications for at least 72 hours, and no sooner than 10 days after the appearance of the first initial symptoms

OR

Previously ill, COVID-19 positive employees may return to work after two subsequent negative respiratory tests taken at least 24 hours apart.

2 Employees who tested positive for COVID-19 but had no symptoms may return to work no sooner than 10 days after their last positive COVID-19 test, or after having two negative respiratory tests taken at least 24 hours apart.

3 Potentially exposed workers who do not develop symptoms may return to work after 14 days of self-isolation.

The information provided here is concise and more details are available from CDC and state health departments.

Resources for more information:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020. Discontinuation of Isolation for Persons with COVID -19 Not in Healthcare Settings Interim Guidance. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/disposition-in-home-patients.html (accessed 18 May 2020).
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020. Public Health Recommendations for Community-Related Exposure. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/public-health-recommendations.html (accessed 18 May 2020).
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020. Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers Responding to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), May 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html (accessed 18 May 2020).

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