

Meat products and coronavirus: transmission unlikely

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During the last few weeks, employees at abattoir and meat cutting facilities have been infected with the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). Therefore, many people have raised the question if coronaviruses can also be transmitted via meat products or other food. Based on the current state of knowledge, this is unlikely. Theoretically, contamination of meat or meat products with coronaviruses is possible during slaughter or during meat cutting and processing. However, the BfR is not yet aware of any SARS-CoV-2 infections via consumption of meat products or contact with contaminated meat products. According to the current state of knowledge, livestock such as pigs or chickens cannot be infected with SARS-CoV-2 and, therefore, cannot transmit the virus to humans by this way. “Coronaviruses cannot multiply in or on food; to do this, they need a living animal or human host,” says BfR President Professor Dr. Dr. Andreas Hensel. “There are no indications for coronaviruses and SARS-CoV-2 that humans can be infected by consumption of food such as meat and meat products. If there is any new and scientifically valid information on this topic, we will examine and assess it, and communicate this immediately.”

Those who want to protect themselves from foodborne infections should always cook meat and poultry sufficiently and evenly before eating.

Coronaviruses can generally be transmitted from an infected person to sausage and meat if hygiene rules are ignored, for example, via contaminated hands, by direct sneezing or coughing. However, the hygiene rules and protective measures that usually must be observed in abattoirs and meat cutting facilities minimise the risk of contamination of meat and meat products with pathogens, which also applies to SARS-CoV-2. Meat and meat products in retail stores are usually protected from sneezing and coughing by customers by splash guards at the counter; these minimise the risk of contamination.

A smear infection of another person only appears theoretically possible if this food is touched shortly after contamination and the virus is then transmitted via the hands to the mucous membranes of the nose, eyes or mouth. However, due to the relatively low stability of coronaviruses in the environment (see FAQs on the new type of coronavirus, link below), transmission through smear infection would only be possible during a short period after contamination. According to the current state of knowledge, the transmission pathway by consuming meat products does not play a role in the current outbreak of SARS-CoV-2.

To protect yourself from virus transmission, it is crucially important to observe the general rules of everyday hygiene such as washing your hands regularly and keeping your hands away from your face also when preparing food.

Furthermore, the risk of foodborne infections can be reduced if meat and poultry are heated throughout to at least 70°C for at least two minutes before consumption, or until the meat juice trickling out is clear and the meat has turned to a whitish colour (poultry), a greyish-pink colour (pork) or a grey-brown colour (beef).

Further information on the subject from the BfR website

FAQs on the novel coronavirus in relation to food and objects:

https://www.bfr.bund.de/en/can_the_new_type_of_coronavirus_be_transmitted_via_food_and_objects_-244090.html

Information on hygiene when handling food:

<https://www.bfr.bund.de/cm/364/protection-against-foodborne-infections.pdf>



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