

# Penn State Extension Response to Consumer Food Safety Concerns During COVID-19

Amber Denmon, MS, RDN, LDN, Sharon McDonald, MEd, RD, LDN, Nicole McGeehan, MPH, CHES  
Penn State Extension, The Pennsylvania State University

## Abstract

Penn State Extension Food Safety and Quality Team educators regularly conduct face-to-face food safety education programs on retail and consumer food safety. In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused educators to pause and brainstorm what food safety resources around COVID-19 were necessary during the pandemic. Educators moved quickly during the early stages of the pandemic shutdown to highlight important existing products, but also to develop articles, posters, and videos on critical food safety issues during this time. The articles and videos produced were unique, highlighting the difference between sanitizing and disinfecting, proper handwashing, proper mask wearing, what to think about while dining out or shopping at a grocery store or farmers market. As restrictions continued, the team expanded their outreach by offering webinars on topics related to food safety at food banks, food safety for non-profit organizations and home food preservation.

Website statistics show that between March 15 and June 30, 2020, articles, posters, and videos on the food safety website had 7800 unique views. From May to August, ten webinars conducted by the team and offered at no fee to the public had approximately 4000 registered participants. Sixteen additional webinars were held on various home food preservation topics during that time frame. These webinars had a \$5 registration fee with a registration of 1,396 individuals.

## Website/Article

The Food Safety Team used our Home Food Safety website <https://extension.psu.edu/food-safety-and-quality/home-food-safety> to provide up-to-date, accurate, research-based information. This was critical during the early days of the pandemic in order to dispel misinformation related to food safety.

Summary of the Home Food Safety website activity from March 2020 to January 2021.

- Website had a 26% increase in unique views when compared to March 2019 to January 2020
- 71% of the unique views were between April 2020 and September 2020
- 21 articles and fact sheets were developed by the team related to food safety and COVID-19
- Most viewed articles were:
  - *Protecting Yourself from COVID-19 while Grocery Shopping* (3230)
  - *Farmers Market Shopping Tips with COVID-19 in Mind* (861)
  - *Food Safety when Cooking at Home During Quarantine* (834)
- *Cloth Mask Use and Removal* video was viewed 575 times with an average view duration of 1:80 minutes (73% of the video)



## Webinars

### Cooking for Crowds: A Volunteer's Guide to Safe Food Handling

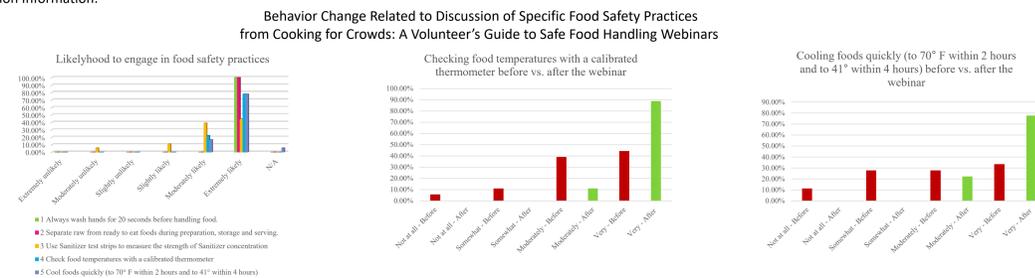
As gathering restrictions began to ease, non-profit groups that normally prepare and serve food to the public as part of their fundraising were looking for information on safely resuming these events. The team developed a one-hour webinar specifically for these organizations to help guide them through the process. Additionally, our traditional Cooking for Crowds three hour in person workshop was adapted to a webinar format. The pilot webinar received positive feedback and the team decided to offer a monthly Cooking for Crowds webinar.

#### Planning Food Events for Non-Profits with COVID-19 in Mind (1 hour)

- Four webinars between August/December 2020 – 271 registered participants with 215 attending
- Fee – free
- Webinar focus on meeting the COVID-19 guidelines established by PA Department of Agriculture and CDC for safely preparing and serving food to the public

#### Cooking for Crowds: A Volunteer's Guide to Safe Food Handling (3 hours)

- Four webinars between September 2020/February 2021 – 89 registered with 80 attending
- Fee - \$5/person
- Included poll questions, videos, activities to encourage participant interaction
- Evaluation Information:



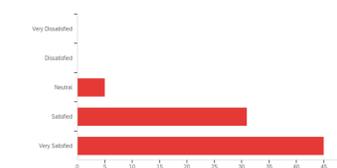
### Food Safety for Donated Foods Webinars

In 2020, there was an increase in food distribution sites nationally. To address the issue of food safety of donated food products, Penn State Extension offered a Food Safety for Donated Foods webinar. Objectives included: Provide the reasons why receiving food safely is important to organizations, understand what types of foods can be donated safely, encourage organizations to share the information with others, and discuss specific covid-19 guidelines for food distribution sites.

- Three webinars between July 2020/December 2020 – 350 participants
- Fee - Free
- Evaluation Information:
  - 72% of participants learned something new for general requirements for receiving shelf stable foods.
  - 59% Learned something new about time/temperature control for food safety when receiving foods.
  - 69% learned something new about determining shelf life or products and understanding product dating.
  - 68% Learned something new about general requirements for receiving refrigerated foods
  - 66% General requirements for receiving frozen foods
  - 64% learned new knowledge about safety points to consider for COVID-19

Participant Quotes "The legal presentation was particularly interesting and new material to take into consideration. Excellent and informative, especially about handling donated bakery products."

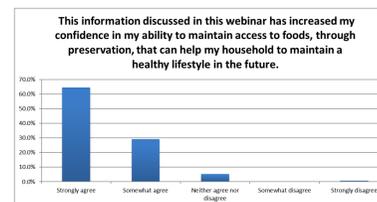
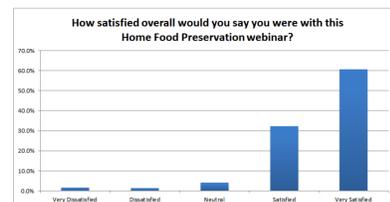
How satisfied overall would you say you were with this Donated Food Products webinar?



### Home Food Preservation Webinar Series

Penn State Extension Food Safety and Quality educators typically conduct face-to-face home food preservation lectures, demonstrations, and hands-on workshops during the spring, summer, and fall preservation seasons. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged the team to develop an alternative format for delivering this important education to our clients. The Food Safety and Quality educators developed a series of webinars focused on different food preservation topics. Each webinar was presented by a team of educators and included a lecture with research-based home food preservation information and a live demonstration. The webinars were presented via Zoom and multiple cameras were utilized so that participants could clearly see the procedure being demonstrated. We collaborated with our marketing team who helped us advertise the webinar series through email and social media. In 2019, we had 389 participants attend our in-person Home Food Preservation programming, in 2020 we had 1,396 participants attend one, or more, of our webinars including many from other states and countries. Moving from in-person workshops to webinars increased our participation by 359%.

- Sixteen webinars between June 2020/October 2020 – 1,396 participants
- Fee - \$5/person (except for the introduction classes, they were free)
- Included poll questions, videos, live demonstrations, and live question and answer segments
- Evaluation Information:
  - On the topic of following proper procedures to use when canning/freezing/drying foods to ensure a safe, quality product, 27% of respondents stated they learned a great deal of information by attending the webinar, while 25% of respondents stated that they learned a moderate amount.
  - On the topic of using characteristics of food to determine its suitability for freezing/drying/the recommended canning method to use, 35% of respondents stated they learned a great deal of information by attending the webinar, while 23% of respondents stated that they learned a moderate amount.
  - There was a 32% increase in the number of respondents who perceived themselves as being very confident on safely water bath canning food compared from before to after the webinar.
  - There was a 25% increase in the number of respondents who perceived themselves as being very confident on safely pressure canning food compared from before to after the webinar.
  - There was a 32% increase in the number of respondents who perceived themselves as being very confident on freezing foods compared from before to after the webinar.
  - There was a 32% increase in the number of respondents who perceived themselves as being very confident on drying foods from before to after the webinar.



## Summary

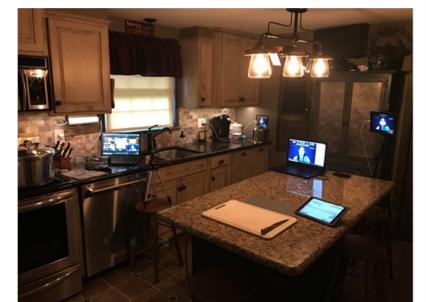
The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in both challenges and opportunities for the Penn State Extension Food Safety and Quality Team. After the initial shock that all in-person food safety programming was to cease as of March 16, 2020, the team quickly came together to strategize a plan of action. The first goal was to provide science-based information for the consumer which we were able to accomplish through our Home Food Safety website. Website views increased when compared to the same period the previous year as people were looking for COVID-19 information. As it became apparent that we would not be returning to in-person programming the team adapted by offering virtual workshop/program options on a variety of topics. The webinar format greatly expanded our outreach since we were not location bound. Evaluation results indicated that participants increased their knowledge, confidence in applying what they learned and were planning to implement new behaviors.

While our team has been able to resume some in-person programming with restrictions, remote programming through webinars will continue to be the norm over the coming months. We will continue to enhance our delivery to include more opportunity for participant interaction. Moving forward our programming will look very different, taking what we have learned over the past year by enhancing all our food safety educational programs.



Crossroad Church of Nazarene volunteers participating in Extension's Cooking for Crowds: A Volunteer's Guide to Food Safety webinar on 9/26/2020

Photo Credit: Ashley Kuhns



Behind the scenes kitchen set-up for a live food demonstration as part of the Home Food Preservation webinar series.

Photo Credit: Andy Hirneisen

## Acknowledgements

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