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Translation 2nd Edition

GUIDE

to best practices in food, health, and safety for the handling of containers and other reusable items

Roundtable for Waste Reduction Food Working Group

This guide was prepared by Coopérative Incita, CRPE (Cafés et Restaurants Pour l'Environnement), La vague, Circuit Zéro Déchet, the Direction régionale de santé publique de Montréal, the Quebec Zero Waste Association, Montréal-Métropole en Santé, Équiterre, and Net Impact Montréal.

The content of this document was revised in collaboration with the regional public health branch of the CIUSSS of Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal, to the extent of scientific knowledge available at the time of publication.



GUIDE

to best practices in food, health, and safety for the handling of containers and other reusable items

This guide was translated from French to English by Net Impact Montréal in collaboration with the members of the Roundtable for Waste Reduction. The original version of the document can be found <u>here</u>.

This document has no legal or regulatory value. Its sole purpose is to support the restaurant and food industry in the implementation or revival of safe, environmentally responsible practices.

The topics discussed reflect the information available at the time of writing these recommendations and are subject to change.

The best health practices described in this guide apply to the context of COVID-19 but should remain in effect at all times.

This guide does not provide a solution that can be applied the same way in all establishments. It is therefore important for each business to establish its own protocols according to its needs.

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Preface

During the COVID-19 pandemic, gains in reuse habits and source reduction initiatives were greatly undermined. Health issues are at the heart of these challenges and many retailers, citizens and organizations have worked to maintain these good practices since public health departments defined best practices regarding the health and safety of reusable products. Using the first edition of this guide, many retailers were able to reinstate the use of reusable containers with confidence. As a result, more establishments are now offering to refill customers' personal containers or to provide returnable containers.

<u>A report released in June 2021</u> by researchers at the University of Toronto, the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, and the Institute of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation states that scientific evidence shows that reusable products still remain relevant in the retail environment, and that there is little scientific reason to ban the use of reusable products during the pandemic. The report also mentions the importance of not ignoring the unintended, long-term public health consequences of any return to single-use plastics.

Despite these efforts, there is still a long way to go to ensure the widespread use of reusable containers. This guide proposes concrete solutions enabling retailers to contribute to this ideal and eventually move towards more environmentally responsible practices. **The Roundtable for Waste Reduction** is a standing committee established to have the legitimacy and professionalism of the zero waste movement recognized by government departments and agencies, organizations and the general public.

The working group wishes to stimulate the collaboration of all actors in the zero waste community, in order to

- Develop arguments and common positions to introduce eco-responsible principles into post-COVID economic recovery initiatives;
- Integrate the environmental, social, health and public components of the project by working with key players in the community;
- Provide a clear picture by documenting and communicating the health issues surrounding reusables and disposables;
- Increase the confidence of the public and all food sector stakeholders by consolidating best practices.

The main objective of the approach is to use the COVID-19 pandemic as a lever to (re)implement best practices in source reduction in the food sector (restaurants, grocery stores and cafés).

Given its expertise in waste management and its desire to help implement structural changes to promote the socio-ecological transition, the Incita Cooperative, initiator of the Roundtable, coordinated the project for the *Guide to best practices in food, health and safety for the handling of containers and other reusable items.* The Roundtable plays host to several organizations involved in source reduction: CRPE (Cafés et Restaurants Pour l'Environnement), La vague, Circuit Zéro déchet, the Direction régionale de santé publique de Montréal, the Quebec Zero Waste Association, Montréal-Métropole en santé, Équiterre and Net Impact Montréal.

Objectives of the Food Working Group

The mission of the Food Working Group of the Roundtable for Waste Reduction is to strengthen zero waste food initiatives and to incorporate them into a larger network.

To do so, the Roundtable's objectives are to

- 1) Create and strengthen links between actors in the zero waste and food sectors;
- 2) Bring together key players of these sectors in order to identify and work on priority issues in terms of source reduction in food preparation and thus develop a global solution for our food system;
- 3) Contribute to the creation and dissemination of knowledge, resources, tools, and reliable and recognized references on the safe use of reusable containers in the food industry in order to encourage best zero waste practices in relation to food.

Summary of best health and environmental practices

For retailers and their employees

- Clearly display health and safety procedures for customers.
- Install a hand sanitizer dispenser or hand wash basin at the entrance which customers must use on entering.
- Offer pre-packaged products in returnable/reusable containers whenever possible.
- Accept only clean, uncracked and preferably unlabelled containers from customers.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces on a regular basis with the usual products recommended by the <u>Guide des bonnes pratiques d'hygiène et de salubrité alimentaires</u> (Guide to Good Food Hygiene and Safety Practices, available only in French).

*An <u>older, slightly different version in English</u> is available for reference. For best practices and to comply with local regulations, an up-to-date version should always be followed.

*Added by Net Impact Montréal

- Wash your hands regularly.
- For employee-handled serving utensils: assign specific utensils to -food items for repeated use, and regularly clean and sanitize them.
- For customer-handled service utensils: clean and sanitize after each use.

For the customers

- Use food containers that are empty, clean, not cracked and preferably unlabelled.
- Favour containers with a large enough opening for easy, non-contact filling.
- Wash or disinfect your hands on entering the store.
- Avoid contact between your containers and the retailer's dispensers.
- Handle and fill your own grocery bags by keeping them in your shopping cart.
- Clean reusable grocery bags between each use.
- Be appreciative of all the efforts made by your retailers.

1. Reminders regarding the specific context of the pandemic

General guidelines related to COVID-19

For all the details concerning the specific health measures to be implemented in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, we suggest the following authorities: <u>Institut national de santé publique du Québec</u> (INSPQ), the <u>Direction régionale de santé publique</u> (DRSP) in your region, the <u>Ministère de l'Agriculture</u>, <u>des Pêcheries et de l'Alimentation du Québec</u> (MAPAQ), the <u>Government of Québec</u>, the <u>Government</u> <u>of Canada</u> and the <u>World Health Organization</u> (WHO).

The best health practices described in this guide apply to the context of COVID-19 but should remain in effect at all times, even after the current crisis has ended.

Modes of transmission of COVID-19

✓ State of knowledge at the time of publication of this guide

The virus is transmitted through aerosols released into the air when an infected person talks, coughs or sneezes. The virus has a highly variable survival time depending on temperature, humidity, and the surface on which the droplets settle. Although the virus responsible for the current pandemic can potentially be transmitted through hands, based on current knowledge, when touching a contaminated surface and bringing them to the face, the <u>risk of indirect transmission is considered very low</u>.¹ Handwashing remains the best way to significantly reduce risk of transmission.

In terms of food, the virus is not transmitted by ingestion, nor can it multiply in food.² Health Canada states that there have been no reported cases of COVID-19 transmission through food.³

As always, it is recommended to wash all fruits and vegetables <u>with only water</u>⁴ before consumption. Another recommendation also mentions that "in reality <u>the packaging of fruits and vegetables would</u> increase handling by operators, which is not desirable."⁵

2. Challenges related to the health crisis

Misinformation about the health aspects of reusability

The fact that an object is disposable or reusable does not make it intrinsically more or less safe. It is how the object is used that determines its safety. Routine cleaning and sanitizing of reusable containers ensure product safety, which is not possible with their disposable version.

It should be noted that public health authorities, whether federal, provincial, or local, did not prohibit the use of reusable items during the health crisis and generally agree on the practicality of safely using such items.

Impacts of zero waste movement for retailers

A survey conducted from May 15 to 19, 2020 by the <u>Observatoire de la Consommation Responsable</u> (OCR) (available in French only) among 1,002 Quebec internet users, aged 18 and older, showed a decline in bulk purchasing practices due to the health crisis.⁶ This reaction from customers and retailers was perfectly legitimate since we had no idea how the virus was transmitted at that time.

Today, it is clear that proper sanitation processes allow for the safe use of reusable containers, so many establishments are returning to them with confidence. This is the case for <u>Starbucks</u>, <u>Bulk Barn</u> and many local businesses. Moreover, on May 31, 2021, the Association des <u>Médecins Résidents de</u> <u>Québec</u> issued a <u>media statement</u> (available in French only) requesting a return to washable dishes in hospitals for both environmental and public health reasons.

3. The advantages of reusability

For retailers

Reusable containers used in a commercial setting have the dual advantage of being environmentally friendly and safe, since they are subject to <u>strict health and safety rules</u>⁷ (available in French only). **These cleaning and sanitation processes have been tested and verified.**

A reusable container can be easily sanitized, thus eliminating all traces of viruses or bacteria, however a single-use package may have been handled by several people throughout its value chain.

The use of reusable items entails initial investments, in terms of both installation and purchase. However, these expenses are offset in the medium term by savings made on recurring purchases of single-use items. For example, according to <u>La vague</u>, and eco-responsibility organization, businesses committed to a source reduction approach have recorded a reduction of some 30% and up to 95% in purchases of disposable cups and utensils respectively.⁸

In addition, continued use of disposables could increase a business's dependence on external suppliers, which can quickly become problematic in times of crisis. Working with the customer's containers or with returnable containers reduces this dependence on external suppliers and thus reduces operational risks.

Furthermore, implementing measures to work with reusable containers makes it possible to stand out since the demand for this practice is still very present among many customers.

Finally, cultivating social responsibility and promoting an environmental approach within a business has the <u>effect of increasing employee productivity</u>, <u>motivation</u>, <u>commitment and retention</u>⁹ (available in French only), a collateral benefit that is not negligible in challenging times.

For the customers

By refilling a store's reusable containers, customers know that the retailer is implementing a regulated food safety process, as there are health codes in the food industry requiring that dishes be cleaned and sanitized according to strict safety standards. In addition, because the supply chain is much shorter and more direct than that of disposable alternatives, the handling stages between sanitizing the reusable container and their use by customers are minimized.

When customers bring their own reusable containers, they make sure that they are the only ones who have handled them. Clerks who need to handle such containers, are required to provide a service in keeping with health rules. Here again, handling is reduced.

Although reusable packing is the best option, there is one exception to the rule: allergen-free food. To certify that a product is allergen-free and to avoid cross-contamination, a retailer cannot sell it in bulk.

4. Management of personal reusable containers

It is always important to have processes in place that limit contact between personal containers and commercial facilities.

For all the procedures adopted by an establishment, it is important to develop a clear protocol and to communicate it to its employees and customers in order to ensure its effective application.

Health and safety rules for customers

Customers seeking a zero-waste service should bring an empty, clean, unbroken, non-cracked and preferably unlabelled container, and ensure that the opening is wide enough for non-contact filling with the food item in question. The customers should remove the lid themselves to avoid the clerk having to handle the container.

Customers must also respect the retailer's right not to serve them in any container that is deemed inappropriate or if the conditions of service are not adequate to ensure food safety.

All reusable personal containers should be washed with hot water and soap before use.

Preparation area versus service area

The **service area** is defined by the area of the store, including the counters, where **customers can drop off their personal containers** (e.g., the cash counter where payments are made).

The **preparation area**, on the other hand, **should only be accessible to employees who prepare food**. Customers cannot access this area and employees must keep it free of contamination. To avoid cross-contamination, whether in times of a health crisis or not, customer containers should never come into contact with the retailer's preparation area.

All personal containers must remain in the service area. Containers may also be placed on a tray that will be moved to the preparation area and cleaned and sanitized between each handling. If the customer's container comes into contact with any surface in the preparation area, the area must be cleaned and sanitized immediately afterwards.



Zero waste service at food counters (cheesemaker, butchery, etc.)

- Procedures inspired by Circuit Zéro déchet (available in French only)¹⁰
- 1. When customers arrive at the store, ask them to wash or sanitize their hands.
- 2. Personal containers (empty, clean, uncracked, preferably unlabelled and with a large enough opening) are to be placed **open** in the service area for non-contact filling.

Another option is to ask the person to place the open container on a tray held by the clerk, who then brings it to the prep area. The tray must then be sanitized (refer to Preparation area versus service area, Page 10).



- 3. Unless assigned to a single food item, sanitized utensils must be used between each service.
- 4. If there is a need to weigh food in an outside container and also avoid the use of trays, wrappers or other containers,
 - Make sure to handle only the outside of the containers;
 - Place the container on the scale and zero the scale;
 - Leave the scale at zero and take the container off it;
 - Using your service utensils, place the requested product inside the container;
 - Weigh the container again with the product inside and print out the price tag;
 - Stick the price tag on the container;
 - Do not forget to recalibrate your scale WITHOUT the container;
 - Clean and sanitize your surfaces and utensils, and wash your hands properly.
- 5. Whenever possible, ask the customers to retrieve their container and close it themselves.

Self-serve bulk service (zero-waste grocery stores)

Here is the process recommended for commercial facilities:

- 1. When customers arrive at the store, ask them to wash or disinfect their hands.
- 2. Provide each customer with a previously disinfected marker pen. The pen will be returned to a dedicated box at checkout to be disinfected again.
- 3. Ensure a non-contact service process between personal containers and delivery devices. For example:
 - Use devices with a tap to keep the customer's container at a distance during service;
 - Provide arriving customers with previously disinfected tools to create a gap between
 personal containers and the store's delivery systems (such as funnels). At the checkout,
 customers will be able to return their tools in a dedicated box so that they can be sanitized
 again;
 - Opt for the "one scoop, one product, one use" strategy. The scoop must then be placed in a bin to that effect in order to be sanitized.
- 4. Depending on the number of customers, regularly sanitize all frequently used surfaces such as taps, scales, etc.



Zero waste service at food counters (cafés, restaurants)

- 1. When customers walk into the store, ask them to wash or disinfect their hands.
- Personal containers (empty, clean, non-cracked, preferably unlabelled and with a large enough opening) are placed **open** on the service counter for non-contact filling. Non-contact filling is perfectly suitable <u>for beverages</u>, pastries or any type of product that readily fits into a container with a wide opening.

Alternative filling option: ask customers to place their **open** container on a tray held by the clerk, who then brings it to the preparation area. The tray must then be sanitized (refer to Preparation area versus service area, Page 10).

- 3. Unless assigned to a single food item, sanitized utensils must be used between each service. If a utensil comes into contact with the container (beverage mix for example), place it afterwards in a container dedicated to sanitation.
- 4. Ask customers to retrieve their containers.

According to the Guide des bonnes pratiques d'hygiène et de salubrité alimentaires (available in French only), wearing gloves is not required and gives a false sense of security¹¹. When used improperly, gloves can even be a vector of contamination on multiple surfaces. Frequent hand washing remains the most effective prevention method.

In today's health and safety environment, no food or cutlery (e.g. utensils, dishes, trays, glasses, water jugs, napkins, straws, etc.) should be left in self-service. The clerk can simply provide the customer with them upon request. Moreover, by freeing up the counter, it is easier to clean it. Similarly, remove containers of condiments and seasonings (salt, pepper, sugar, oils, spices, etc.) from the tables, **provide them upon customer request** and disinfect them between each service¹².



5. Management of returnable and refillable containers

The methods applied before the crisis must still be maintained. For example, reusable dishes and utensils, whether returnable or not, must be systematically cleaned and sanitized according to the usual standards recommended by the <u>Guide des bonnes pratiques d'hygiène et de salubrité alimentaires</u>¹¹ (available in French only).

Instructions on how to return refillable containers:

- Reserve a <u>return area</u>¹³ for containers which allows the customer to dispose of the item without the employee having to handle it. For example, install a returnable cup collection bin at the front of the checkout to facilitate returns and refunds. An employee may move the bin to the cleaning area afterwards.
- If contact with a returned item is unavoidable, ensure that employees wash their hands after each handling.
- Although the risk of indirect contamination through the exchange of cash remains low, it is recommended to favour a credit system on the next purchase or an electronic discount on a credit card. However, it is forbidden to refuse cash payments.

6. Take-out orders

Take-out orders in returnable containers facilitate the health and safety process while reducing traffic in the store.

- Offer customers the option of having their orders delivered in reusable and returnable containers that are pre-cleaned and sanitized.
- Recover containers from one delivery to another or give customers an opportunity to return them safely (see Section 5), and then clean and sanitize them.

To discover the right procedures to prepare an order, please refer to the guide prepared by La vague¹⁴ (available in French only).

If customers request take-out orders in their personal containers, provide contactless service as described in Section 4.

7. Compostable, recyclable, and biodegradable options

Issues related to so-called compostable items

It can be easy to fall into the "best waste management" marketing trap by encouraging the development of allegedly compostable single-use products.

On the one hand, the major pitfalls of recycling on a global scale (such as market volatility for certain post-consumer materials or the development of a material that is less efficient than the original) highlight the fact that recycling is not a sustainable solution and should remain one of the last options in the life of an object.

On the other hand, one of the most common forms of greenwashing is so-called compostable products. In addition to using agricultural land for their manufacture, they end up in large numbers either in an engineered landfill or an incinerator where they produce methane, a greenhouse gas 21 times more detrimental than CO₂.¹⁵

Furthermore, the variety of the marketing offers surrounding these products creates a great deal of confusion for both retailers and consumers, especially since treatment facilities do not allow for uniform acceptance of allegedly compostable products.

As a result, many of these products actually act as contaminants for composting facilities. Despite the "compostable" label on single-use plant-derived plastic packaging, many of these products take too long to effectively compost and must be removed from organic materials and sent to landfill to avoid contamination.

Since compostable packaging also tends to be more expensive, reusable containers and other materials remain the most advantageous from an environmental, sanitary, and economic standpoint.

TO KEEP IN MIND...

- Reusable containers remain the option with the smallest environmental footprint after sufficient use.
- Compostable and recyclable packaging should only be chosen if reusable options are not feasible, while ensuring that the necessary facilities for responsible disposal are available.
- "Biodegradable" packaging should be avoided as this term does not indicate that it is compostable or recyclable.
- The so-called "oxo-biodegradable" packaging should be forbidden since they are neither compostable nor recyclable.





If this subject interests you, watch <u>RAD's video clip</u> on the management of compostable single-use packaging (available in French only)

8. Issues related to single-use materials

Whether materials are recyclable, disposable, or compostable, life cycle analyses comparing different single-use options conclude that no single-use product is better than another. They all have advantages and disadvantages in terms of their environmental impacts.

The studies also conclude that <u>from an environmental perspective, reusable products consistently</u> <u>perform better than any single-use option</u>¹⁶ (available in French only). This performance can be explained via a life cycle analysis of each product. Much energy and resources go into the production of materials. To amortize the impact, it is necessary to use items as long as possible. This is why a single-use product, regardless of the material it is made of, cannot be as ecological as a container that is reused for a long time.

That being said, if you can't avoid single-use options, make sure you send these materials to a place that can actually process them. Also, be sure to apply the 4 Rs philosophy in the following order:

- 1 Refuse what you don't need
 - 2 Reduce what you need
 - Reuse what can be reused whenever possible
 - (As a last resort) Compost and recycle what's left

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