

COVID-19 Science Report: Exit Strategies Appendix – Safe Reopening of Dining In

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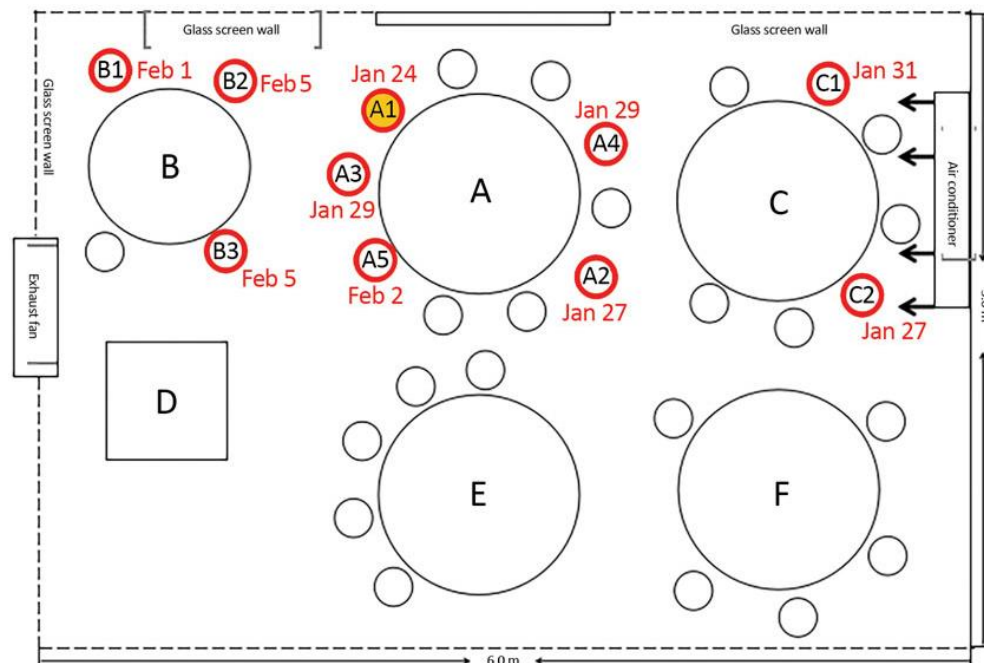
Safe Reopening of Dining In

With the COVID-19 pandemic, varying degrees of restrictions had been imposed on dining in at food and beverage (F&B) establishments. For the majority of countries that were in partial or full lockdowns, F&B establishments were mandated by law to not allow for customers to dine in. Even for countries that did not have such laws or lockdowns, many customers had voluntarily chosen not to dine in to maintain social distancing. As countries go through different phases of exiting from lockdowns and reopening the economy, various measures have been mandated or recommended for the reopening of F&B establishments for dining in. The effectiveness of the individual and combination of measures in reducing risks are dependent on the specific contexts for which they are implemented in. Currently, evidence is limited and the constant review and updating of policies and guidelines is needed.

Risks of Dining In

Dining together or in proximity have been documented to be events of high transmissions leading to known clusters. One of the most prominent of such events would be the Lunar New Year banquet in Wuhan,¹ which saw a gathering of thousands of residents days before the city went into a lockdown. In Singapore, investigations of clusters have also found events of dining together or in proximity to be the source events of some transmissions^{2,3,4} to be the events leading to transmissions.

An investigation into the cluster of 10 people from three different families that ate in a same restaurant in Guangzhou found that the direction of airflow from air-conditioning could explain the transmission.⁵ Neighbouring tables not in the path of air from the air-conditioning did not have reported cases of infections.



There are inherent risks with dining that have been raised as a concern.⁶ These risks, particularly of how dining was before COVID-19, include that: 1) masks cannot be worn during eating and drinking, 2) people talk as they socialise during meals, 3) diners in F&B establishments can be packed in and in close proximity, 4) diners are in an indoor setting with limited ventilation and the use of air-conditioning, and 5) high touched surfaces and

objects such as menus do pose risks for fomite transmissions.⁷ Returning to how dining was before COVID-19 thus would not be likely as countries and communities seek to minimise risks of transmissions with the reopening of F&B establishments for dining in.

Measures Around the World

As countries start to relax measures as they exit from lockdowns, various combinations of measures have been put in place in F&B establishments for dining in. Here we review these measures by categories instead of by countries in order to present them as a menu of options and to review their popularity, practicality, and pain in implementation.

Pre-Entry Screening and Contact Tracing Log

Like many establishments, temperature measurements as screening checks are part of the measures taken by F&B establishments. Customers with high temperatures could be barred from entry. Additionally, before entry, customers are requested to submit names and contact details as log of their presence in that establishment to facilitate potential future contact tracing purposes. Different countries have implemented these measures to various degrees of strictness and ease.

In China, temperature checks are mandated before entry into F&B establishments, along with the scanning of a customer's coloured QR codes.⁸ The colour of the codes (green, yellow, and red) reflect the health status and risk profile of an individual, with F&B establishments having the right to turn away those without a green QR code. The scanning of the QR codes automatically creates an electronic log of the customer's entry to the F&B establishment. The codes contain the relevant personal information of name and contact details, thereby serving the function of facilitating potential future contact tracing. In other parts of Asia, similar approach of mandatory temperature checks and recommended use of the national contact tracing apps for entry have been implemented in Singapore⁹ and in Vietnam.^{10,11}

In Australia, the government has not imposed temperature checks and have left it to individual establishments to decide on the measures taken.¹² Across the different regions, customers entering the establishments must provide their names and contact details.^{13,14,15,16,17,18} Such an approach is also taken in some countries in Europe, mandated in parts of Germany¹⁹ and Italy.^{20,21} In view of protection of personal data, documents must be destroyed after 4 weeks.^{22,23} For establishments using physical instead of electronic logging of customer entries and information, the paperwork could be burdensome.²⁴

Physical Distancing and Capacity Limits

A common measure implemented in F&B establishments in many countries has been keeping physical distancing of diners at different tables, ranging from 1 meter to 2 meters apart. This measure is usually supplemented with recommended guidelines or mandatory regulations to keep to a fraction of the maximum capacity of customers to lower the density in the establishment. Additionally, there could also be on the number of people per table dining together.

In Beijing, dining tables have to be at an interval of at least 1 meter,²⁵ with maximum of four people per table.²⁶ This limit of four people per table is kept the same in some countries in Europe, such as Austria²⁷ and Luxembourg.²⁸ In Singapore, when dining in will be allowed again, the limit will be maximum of five people per table.²⁹ The maximum number of people per table are kept to a larger number of 10 in some countries in Europe, such as Belgium,³⁰ France,³¹ and Denmark.³²

In Australia, regulations are set for establishments to keep to average of no more than one customer per 4m². There are also limits of total customers within the same enclosed space, with differences across different regions, ranging from 10 in Tasmania,³³ 20 in Queensland,³⁴ to up to 100 in Western Australia.³⁵ In some countries in Europe, such as Finland³⁶ and Portugal,³⁷ regulations are based on keeping the total number of customers in the establishment to half the maximum capacity.

As many have been eagerly awaiting the reopening for F&B establishments for dining in, crowds would be expected to return to these establishments. With now majorly reduced capacities, many customers would have to be turned away or queue up for entry, as was seen in New Zealand.³⁸ Governments, police, and the establishments would have to play their parts in crowd control and ensuring safe physical distancing measures of the crowds as well.

Masks and Shields

Many countries around the world have mandated the use of face masks when out in public. However, as it is not possible to eat with face masks on, the rule for mask wearing while dining in has to be adjusted. The level of adjustment has varying degrees of strictness. Some countries, like Austria,³⁹ Luxembourg,⁴⁰ Germany,⁴¹ and France,⁴² have mandated the wearing of masks while entering or leaving the F&B establishment, allowing for the removal only when seated at the table. Czech Republic had lifted its mandatory requirement of wearing of face mask when in public, but kept to requiring it in F&B establishments anytime one is not eating or drinking, though it is not being strictly enforced.⁴³ In Hong Kong, some restaurants provide each table with paper bags for customers to store their mask, alongside hygiene wipes and sanitiser.⁴⁴

Partition screens between tables or even between diners in the same table are being used to limit spread of droplets and stop transmission. There are, however, question on the effectiveness of these partition screens since droplet simulations in setting of office with partitions have found them unlikely to impede spread.⁴⁵ In Luxembourg, the government has mandated the use of these partition screens only if the physical distance of 1.5m between tables cannot be maintained.⁴⁶ In South Korea,⁴⁷ Singapore,⁴⁸ and Italy,⁴⁹ some F&B establishments have chosen to set up these clear partition screens between diners on the same table. Other more creative variations include the individual shield pods by a restaurant in France,⁵⁰ and 'quarantine greenhouses' by a restaurant in the Netherlands that completely covers a table and its diners.⁵¹ Across different regions in Australia, the use of such partitions are being considered only for areas with high interactions, such as the cashiers.^{52,53,54,55,56}

Surface and Utensil Disinfection

High touched surfaces and objects such as menus do pose risks for fomite transmissions between users. Increased regular disinfecting of tables have been pushed by the governments and public. In Italy, establishment are mandated to be cleaned twice daily,⁵⁷ while in France, rules are stricter, with tables having to be disinfected after each sitting.⁵⁸ In Portugal, recommendations are for high touched surfaces to be disinfected at least six times a day, while high touched objects like menus and automatic payment terminals are recommended to be disinfected after every use.⁵⁹ Switch to electronic menus^{60,61,62} or single-used paper menus⁶³ have also been reported.

Utensils and tableware for dining in also typically get reused, but should already be adequately cleaned. However, extra precaution is still being taken. In New Zealand, while still in Phase 2 before the recent exit to Phase 1, utensils and tableware had to be

sanitised/disinfected after every use.⁶⁴ In Queensland Australia, non-disposable utensils are permitted if they are cleaned by commercial grade washers, if not, disposable/recyclable single-use utensils should be used.⁶⁵ In Western Australia, only staff will be able to provide cutlery and customers will not be able self-service from a cutlery station.⁶⁶ Due to concerns for adequate cleaning of utensils and tablecloths, restaurants in Italy⁶⁷ and Belgium⁶⁸ have been reported to switch to disposable utensils and place mats.

The extensive use of disposable items has been a concern for the environment as it increases massive waste, a bulk of which could be nonbiodegradable plastic. In Western Australia,⁶⁹ Victoria,⁷⁰ and Northern Territory Australia,⁷¹ guidelines specifically highlighted that there is no benefit for using single-use utensils, amidst the already delay nation-wide ban of single-use plastic.⁷²

Estonia's government has also mandated that disinfectants must be provided to both employees and customers.⁷³ In Beijing,⁷⁴ Shanghai,⁷⁵ and Portugal,⁷⁶ customers are requested by the restaurants to disinfect hands with hand sanitisers before eating.⁷⁷ Some restaurants in Shanghai even went to an extreme of offering full body sanitisation with disinfection misting or spraying stations, or "disinfection tunnels".⁷⁸

Communal Dishes, Utensils, and Condiments

Particularly in Asian cuisine, family-style communal dishes that everyone in the table serve from can be common. In China, 100 academics launched a "dining table revolution" encouraging for a change of dining to have individually portioned meals, use of separate serving utensils, and bringing of own cutlery.⁷⁹ In Beijing, requirements go into effect on June 1, 2020, for banquets to have separating plates, if not, customer would be given two sets of chopsticks in different colours, one pair to be used as serving utensil.⁸⁰ Similarly in Hong Kong, many restaurants are also laying two sets of chopsticks in different colours.⁸¹ In Wuhan, authorities have also launched an aggressive campaign to convince public to go for individual than communal dishes and to get in the habit of using serving utensils.⁸²

Self-serve food (eg buffets) and beverage stations (eg soda fountains) are common in restaurants or at events such as weddings and birthday celebrations. They have since undergone modifications if allowed as F&B establishments reopen and catered events return. In Australia, different regions have differing approaches to buffets and communal water or beverage stations, with some regions not allowing them at all,^{83,84,85,86} while some others allowing them if supervised or operated by staff.^{87,88,89} In Austria, buffets are allowed to continue, but only if the food and drinks are given out by staff, or if dishes are already pre-portioned at the counter just for pickup.⁹⁰ In Finland, self-service from buffets are not allowed at all and require staff to serve,⁹¹ while in Portugal buffets are only discouraged.⁹²

Some F&B establishments are also taking steps on how condiments are being provided. In New South Wales, Australia, communal condiments are not allowed at all.⁹³ Similarly, in Germany, communal salt and pepper shakers, along with vases, serviettes and other items of common use have to be removed.^{94,95} In the UK, some restaurants have also chosen to replace bottles of ketchup and mayonnaise with individual sachets.⁹⁶

Ventilation and Outdoor Dining

With the likely transmission in the direction of airflow from air-conditioning in the restaurant in Guangzhou, recommendations have been made to stop the use of air-conditioning in restaurants or shift to outdoor dining.⁹⁷ In Nanjing, China, some restaurants have stopped the use of central air-conditioning and instead go with natural ventilation with the doors and windows open.⁹⁸ In Portugal, eating outdoors is recommended and encouraged.⁹⁹ In

Scotland, the reopening of restaurants and pubs in Phase 2 (beginning 18 June) will start first with use of outdoor spaces, before indoor spaces allowed to be used in Phase 3 (mid-August).¹⁰⁰ Similarly, in Paris, France, the reopening of restaurants, cafes, and bars are limited to outdoor terraces, with the city council granting special permissions for placement of tables and chairs on sidewalks and public places, even facilitated with road closures.¹⁰¹ Likewise, in Germany, placement of tables and chairs on wide enough pavements in front of F&B establishments are allowed without the need for a permit.¹⁰² In Finland, the limit on the number of customers does not apply to the outdoor seating, though physical distance of 1-2 metres should still be maintained.¹⁰³

Measures by Staff

As F&B establishments reopen, many measures targeting the staff have been put in place protect both the staff and also the customers. Service wait staff in F&B establishments can come into contact with many customers, and could be at high risk of getting infected or infecting others. For many countries and cities around the world, including Shanghai,¹⁰⁴ Vietnam,¹⁰⁵ Singapore,¹⁰⁶ Czech Republic,¹⁰⁷ Luxembourg,¹⁰⁸ Belgium,¹⁰⁹ Germany,¹¹⁰ France,¹¹¹ and Italy,¹¹² wait staff and staff that come in contact with customers have to wear masks at all time. In some cases, such as in Italy¹¹³ and the UK,¹¹⁴ staff have been provided with protective goggles.

In some countries and cities, including Shanghai,¹¹⁵ Austria,¹¹⁶ France,¹¹⁷ and Italy,¹¹⁸ chefs are required either by the government or the F&B establishments to wear masks at all times even though they have minimal to no interaction with customers. This has been pointed out as "unrealistic" for chefs working in a hot environment and needing to taste the food that they are preparing.¹¹⁹

Like many workplaces, F&B establishments in Singapore are also required to organise their staff to operate on split teams with different shifts or days of work.¹²⁰ These teams are not allowed to have cross deployment within an establishment and also across branches of a chained establishment. Such split team arrangements are also being considered in Western Australia¹²¹ and Victoria, Australia,¹²² as well as being recommended in Estonia.¹²³ Split teams should also not mingle and socialise with each other outside of work. A more common measure related to staff arrangements is that start times, break times and meal times are staggered. This is the case also in Singapore,¹²⁴ New Zealand,¹²⁵ and various parts of Australia.^{126,127,128}

Measures limiting the interaction and distance of service wait staff with customers have also been put in place to decrease risks. In Tasmania, each dining area has a different wait staff to limit the number of customers staff interact with.¹²⁹ Some F&B establishments have moved towards having customers put in of orders electronically with tablets or customers' own smart devices without requiring to speak to wait staff.^{130,131} Besides moving towards cashless electronic payments^{132,133,134} or contactless payments^{135,136} to avoid handling of money or cards, F&B establishments are also encouraged to shift to using self-checkouts¹³⁷ to further minimise interactions of staff with customers.

Some restaurants have even gone to extremes, perhaps as a gimmick for publicity. In Sweden, a pop-up restaurant has no wait staff and the food is delivered from the kitchen window in a basket via a pulley system.¹³⁸ In the Netherlands, one restaurant have used robots to serve food, while another with customers in "quarantine greenhouse" have wait staff use long boards to bring dishes to diners.¹³⁹

Many other measures, not specific to staff in F&B establishments in light of reopening of dining in, are also put in place or highlighted. These include temperature measurements as

screening and use of contact tracing apps and logs. Hand hygiene practices, which should already be part of regular safe food handling training and operations in F&B establishments, are also being highlighted. In Portugal, mandatory COVID-19 tests for all staff in F&B establishments are being considered.¹⁴⁰

Additional Considerations

Financial Costs and Economic Impact

All around the world, with major social distancing and lockdown measures in place, the F&B industry has been one of the worse hit. Although many establishments have kept open with the bulk of sales from deliveries and takeaways, the revenue stream is limited and not sufficient to sustain the business and the overheads from maintaining a dine in space.^{141,142}

As these establishments reopen for dining in, the safe physical distancing and capacity limits majorly decrease the volume of customers. In addition, there are customers that are wary of dining out^{143,144} or just not return to dining out as often because they are staying home more or continue to work from home.^{145,146} Restoring sales to achieve profitability is not possible if these are permanent measures.^{147,148,149}

For many of the measures outlined above, additional costs would have to be pumped in, some more long-term investments such as furniture and technological devices, while many are consumables such as hygiene-related supplies, single-use utensils, and individually-packed condiments.¹⁵⁰ These additional costs make it even harder to turn a profit, and also generate a lot of waste.^{151,152} Governments around the world have injected funds to tide businesses over when major social distancing and lockdown measures were in place.^{153,154,155,156,157,158} However, beyond that, governments might need to shoulder the additional costs to maintain these additional measures long-term.¹⁵⁹

For some F&B establishments, the measures outlined above would drastically change the atmosphere of the dine in experience.¹⁶⁰ Some thus prefer not to reopen yet so as not to invest in changes that would go to waste if it is a short-term change. Some might not want to reopen at all as these changes, if long-term, are not in line with the vision for the establishment or are not able to draw the select clientele.

Messaging and Confidence Boosting

The choice of measures being implemented might go beyond having scientific evidence proving significant reductions in transmissions. Implementing certain measures can additionally serve to allay the fears in customers and achieve the benefit of boosting confidence for returning to dining in. Certain limits and cut-offs could have been selected as they provide consistent messaging across all sectors beyond just F&B establishments. This helps make regulations or guidelines easy to remember and reduces confusion.

Conclusion

Unlike schools, which are more likely under the control of governments, it is difficult to impose fixed measures and regulations on the F&B establishments, which are part of the private sector. The sector has incurred major losses due to COVID-19, and the government is trying to reopen and revive them to prevent permanent closures and economic collapse of the sector. Imposing a multitude of strict measures that are burdensome and costly to implement would therefore be counterproductive and difficult to enforce. Finding the right

combination of effective measures that can be practically implemented in a sustainable cost-effective fashion is needed as we continue to live in a world with COVID-19.

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