FSA publishes new research on the survival of coronavirus on food and packaging

The research, conducted by the University of Southampton, was commissioned by the FSA following the publication of its risk assessment in 2020 which concluded it was very unlikely that humans could catch the virus from food. The study involved deliberately adding virus to the surface of food and packaging. It was not designed to consider the probability that food becomes contaminated under normal conditions, or the probability that virus on food will lead to infection.

The study's results shows that the virus's survival varied depending on the foods and food packaging examined. On some foods, such as cheese and ham, the virus survived for several days. On others, such as apples and olives, virus levels dropped quickly. For most food products tested there was a 'significant drop' in the levels of virus contamination over the first 24 hours. These findings confirm that the overall risk to consumers from coronavirus via food remains very low.

> "It is important to ensure that the FSA's advice is based on the best available evidence at all times.
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> "In the early stages of the pandemic, we didn't know much about how the virus would survive on different food surfaces and packaging, so the risk assessment was based on a worst-case assumption.
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> "This research gives us additional insight into the stability of coronavirus on the surfaces of a variety of foods and confirms that assumptions we made in the early stages of the pandemic were appropriate, and that the probability that you can catch COVID via food is very low."
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> Anthony Wilson, Microbiological Risk Assessment Team Leader at the FSA.

The laboratory-based study involved the artificial contamination of coronavirus onto the surfaces of a wide range of foods including various fruits and vegetables, cheese, meats, bread and pastries, and food packaging including plastic trays and bottles, drinks cans and cartons.

The results from this study will not lead to a change in our current advice that there is no need to take additional precautions because of COVID when handling food as long as good hygienic practices are observed. However, they will form part of the evidence considered by the FSA for future risk assessments.

Click here to view the full research project report.