

Pest Control as an Essential Service and COVID-19

By Faith Oi, PMU Director, (foi@ufl.edu)



March 19, 2020; 12:30 PM

The situation with COVID-19 is rapidly changing. Please check back with us by liking us on Facebook (@PMUNews), Twitter (@PMU_News), or subscribing to PMU News (<http://bit.ly/2waaw1X>)

PMPs are critical to protecting public health. Arthropod and vertebrate pests do not decrease because we have a human crisis. In fact, they may become more serious problems. We are heading into mosquito, tick, flea, termite, ant, and stinging insect season all at once due to our mild winter. A couple of years ago I did a series titled "What the World Would Look Like Without Pest Control." We don't have to go down that road.

The Immediate Problem:

Members of the pest control industry are thankfully generally healthy. It is true that most healthy people infected with the virus will have mild symptoms, but this is **the danger: You may be asymptomatic** for COVID-19 and unknowingly transmit it to your customers or others. (Conversely, your customers may be **asymptomatic** and may transmit COVID-19 to you.)

It is important to remember that COVID-19 is a "novel" virus, meaning **we have not seen this before in humans**. Expect COVID-19 to behave like an invasive species introduced to a new area when unchecked. Think tawny crazy ant.

This virus is transmitted from human to human. It is not like Zika, Dengue, West Nile, or yellow fever that is transmitted to humans by mosquitoes or Lyme disease that is transmitted by ticks. It is important to minimize your exposure to COVID-19 like you would minimize your exposure to highly toxic pesticides.

We often say that pest control is "recession proof." This chapter in pest control history will be different because of the human-to-human transmission aspect. You will not be able to service all accounts in the same way. You may be experiencing **suspended or cancelled services at a higher than normal rate** because your customers are worried. However, we must remember that public health pests also vector numerous pathogens that can impact human and animal health as well as food safety. Thus, we believe that pest control of public health pests is an essential service that must be allowed to function.

Here are some suggestions on what you can do:

- Within your companies, **develop a communication strategy** that emphasizes the importance of pest control as an "essential function" to public health to share with customers. Regular communications also may help with customer retention.

- **Show concern** for your customer’s concerns. Physical distancing=social distancing (6 ft perimeter) is required to reduce the spread of COVID-19. You already practice physical distancing when you apply pesticides to protect customers from pesticide drift.
- We talk about the “risk” of pesticides and that “**risk” is related to exposure**. COVID-19 is no different. Your risk will increase with exposure. How can you minimize your exposure to COVID-19?
 - **Appropriate PPE**. We use PPE for pesticides, rodent, bird and vector control work. PPE for you will be critical under current circumstances.
 - **Limit services to outside** where possible. Many pests start from the outside, including those that endanger food safety, eldercare and other health-related facilities.
 - Pests of medical significance that can be serviced from the outside include:
 - Rodents, bats, and other vertebrate pests that can vector pathogens
 - Fire ants and other stinging insects
 - Mosquitoes
 - Flies
 - Ticks
 - Fleas
- Consider providing a **call-ahead** notification before performing a service, if you are not already doing so. This will allow you to inform customers of any service modifications and social-distancing steps you are taking to minimize exposure to COVID-19 before arriving on property.
- If you must go **inside**, maintain physical distancing of at least 6 feet with your customers. You probably already practice physical distancing with customers of inside services. Politely ask clients to give you space to concentrate on what you are looking for during inspections and for their safety when using inspection tools.
 - Pests of medical significance that may need to be serviced inside include:
 - Rodents, bats, and other vertebrate pests that can vector pathogens
 - German cockroaches and other pests that can contaminate food
 - Bed bugs
 - Fleas
 - Stinging and venomous pests
 -

Other obvious points to show concern for your customers:

- **Do not go to work if you are sick.**
- Use common sense. Wash your hands like you handled a pyrethroid. Don’t touch your face.
 - FL DOH has some hand washing posters in English and Spanish.
<http://www.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/childrens-health/school-health/hand-washing.html>

- There's also this from U. of Minnesota on ag worker handwashing stations: <https://extension.umn.edu/growing-safe-food/farm-handwashing-important-food-safety>

Our friends at NPMA and PCT also have guidance for you and your businesses:

- NPMA Coronavirus Update <https://npmapestworld.org/member-center/coronavirus-update/>
- PCOs Safeguarding Employees, Customers Amid Coronavirus Concerns <https://www.pctonline.com/article/pcos-safeguard-employees-customers-coronavirus/>
- Simple flyers for your businesses by CDC <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/factsheets.html>
- In addition, North Carolina State University allowed the UF/IFAS brand to be used on documents which are now on EDIS: http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_series_covid-19_fags

FAQs (We will add to this and may turn this into a separate document.)

1. **Why is COVID-19 so bad and spreading so fast?** COVID-19 is a “novel” virus and is spreading much like invasive species spread in a new area when unchecked. Think tawny crazy ant. They are bad for a while, then plateau. With COVID-19, the window of time to the plateau will depend on people cooperating with guidance minimize their exposure to others.
2. **Where did COVID-19 come from?** We believe it started in an animal then jumped to humans. Viruses mutate. For example, we've known about Zika since 1947, but it is a mutation caused the virulent strain that resulted in microcephaly and other human illnesses.

Acknowledgements: Thank you to Louis Witherington (Falcon PC), Michael Bentley (NPMA), Joe Jonovich (PMU), Amy Simonne (Professor and Extension Specialist, UF/IFAS FYCS, Food Safety and Quality), Tracy Irani (Professor and Chair, UF/IFAS FYCS) for suggestions and edits to this document.