Penn State Extension Response to Consumer Food Safety Concerns During COVID-19
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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 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, what to think about while preparing food, and how to safely store food. 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/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.

- 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 form 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 handling foods. There was an urgent need for webinars specifically for these organizations to help guide them through the process. Additionally, our traditional Cooking for Crowds home hour webinar was updated 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-Profit Food Safety
- Four webinars between August/December 2020 – 271 registered participants with 115 attending
- Fee - Free
- Website 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
- Four webinars between September 2020/February 2021 – 89 registered with 30 attending
- Free
- Includes poll questions, videos, activities to encourage participant interaction

Evaluation Information:
- Behavior Change: Related to Discussion of Specific Food Safety Practices
- 59% Learned something new about time/temperature control for food safety when receiving foods.
- 20% learned something new about determining shelf life for perishable foods and understanding product dating.
- 69% learned something new about freezing foods compared from before to after the webinar.
- 46% learned new knowledge about passing food safety monitoring 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.”

Food Safety for Donated Foods Webinar
- Sixteen webinars between June 2020/October 2020 – 1,396 participants
- Fee – Free
- Included poll questions, videos, activities to encourage participant interaction

Evaluation Information:
- 72% of participants learned something new for general requirements for receiving shelf stable foods.
- 30% learned something new about best before date for food safety when serving foods.
- 69% learned something new about determining shelf life for perishable products and understanding product dating.
- 69% learned something new about freezing foods compared from before to after the webinar.
- 46% General requirements for receiving donated foods.
- 46% 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.”

Food Safety for Donated Foods Webinar
- Four webinars between September 2020/February 2021 – 89 registered with 80 attending
- Fee – Free
- Included poll questions, videos, activities to encourage participant interaction

Evaluation Information:
- 20.00% of respondents stated they learned a great deal of information about how to safely handle food.
- 60.00% of respondents stated they learned a great deal of information about how to safely serve food.
- 20.00% of respondents stated they learned a great deal of information about how to safely store food.
- 60.00% of respondents stated they learned a great deal of information about how to safely transport food.

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

Home Food Preservation Workshops/Events
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 sessions. 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 workshops 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 to Zoom and multiple cameras were utilized so the participants could clearly see the process being demonstrated. We collaborated with our marketing team to help advertise the webinar series through email and social media. In 2020, we had 988 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%.

Evaluation Information:
- Included poll questions, videos, activities to encourage participant interaction
- 70.00% of respondents stated they learned a great deal of information about how to safely freeze food.
- 60.00% of respondents stated they learned a great deal of information about how to safely can food.
- 46% of respondents stated they learned a great deal of information about how to safely dry food.
- 46% of respondents stated they learned a great deal of information about how to safely store food.

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

Summ ary
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 to enhance all our food safety educational programs.

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

Crossroads Church of Nazarene volunteers participating in Extension’s Cooking for Crowds: A Volunteer’s Guide to Safe Food Handling webinar on 6/30/2020

Photo Credit: Ashley Kuhn