

Introduction

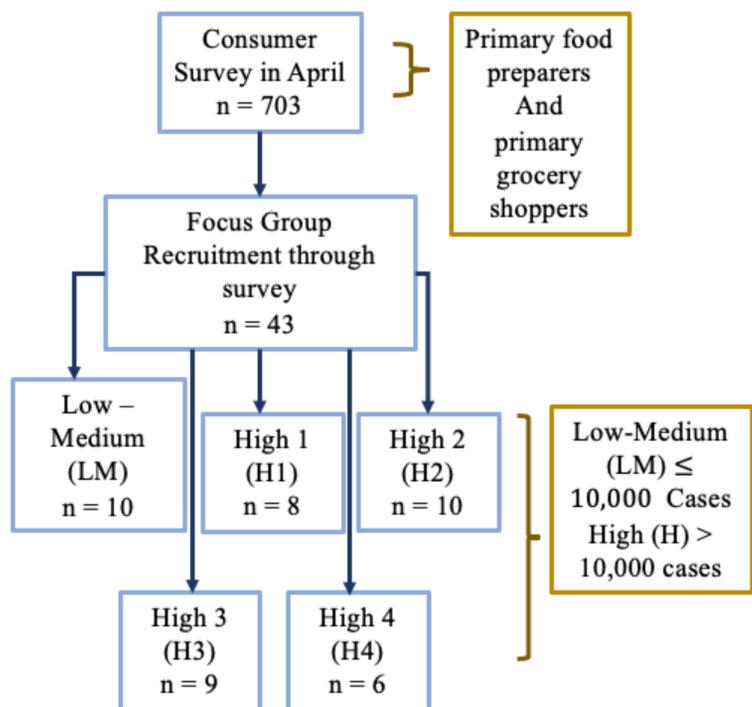
The COVID-19 pandemic influenced consumers to change their food handling practices. According to the 2020 Food and Health survey from the International Food Information Council (IFIC), COVID-19 was the top food safety issue in 2020¹. Consumers may be worried of SARS-Cov-2 surviving on food and adopt certain behaviors to protect themselves.

Objective

This qualitative-quantitative study assessed consumer food safety practices and risk perception during the COVID-19 pandemic using (1) surveys and (2) online focus group sessions.

Materials and Methods

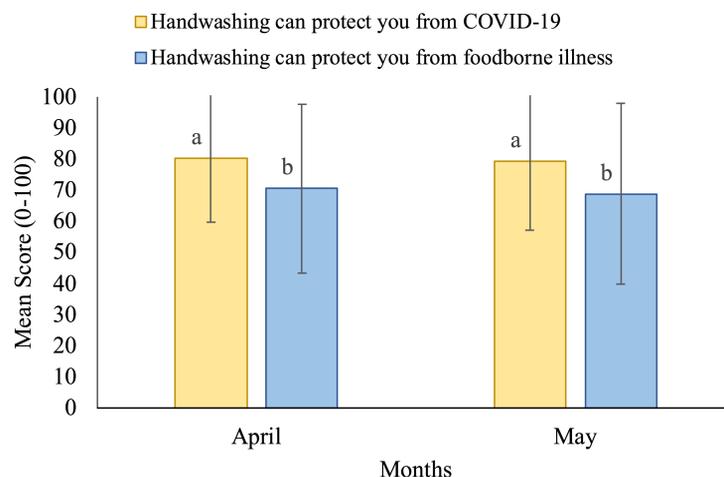
- The surveys were distributed to an online U.S. consumer panel and screened for only primary food preparers and grocery shoppers.
- Focus group volunteers signed up through the surveys and further discussed the topics during a 1.5- hour virtual session via WebEx.
- All questions on the online survey and focus groups were pilot tested.



* Number of COVID-19 cases were found on: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

Figure 1: Flow chart of Quantitative- Qualitative methods using surveys and focus groups

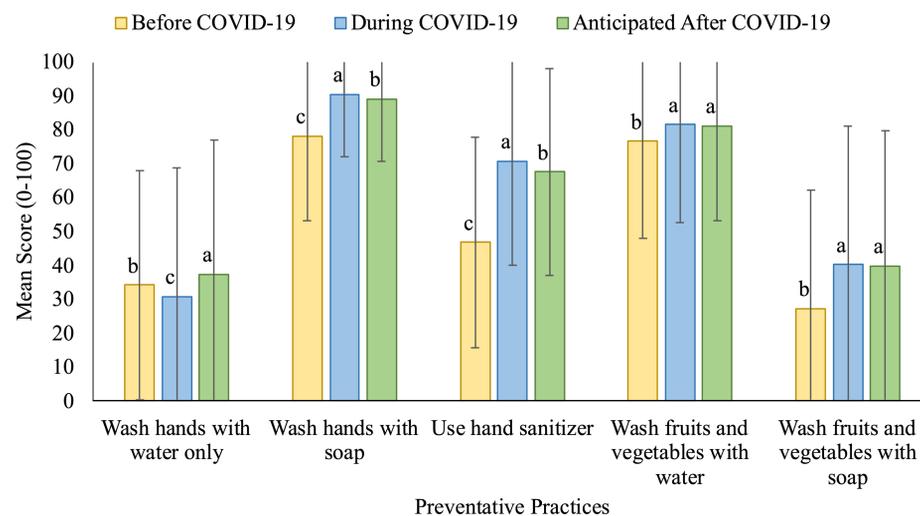
Results



* Different lowercase letters indicate significant differences (p-value < 0.05).

Figure 2. Perception of handwashing: COVID-19 vs. foodborne illness for April (N=703) and May (N=732)

- Most survey respondents believed that handwashing protects them from COVID-19 more than foodborne illness.



* Different lowercase letters indicate significant difference between each group within the same headline (p-value < 0.05).

*April and May Data were similar, so researchers decided to only present April

Figure 3. Levels of preventative practices for April 2020, n = 703

- During the pandemic, consumers complied with handwashing recommendations (soap and water)
- Respondents anticipated themselves to get back to wash with “water only” after the pandemic.
- Many survey respondents reported increased their levels of washing fruits and vegetables with soap during the pandemic and anticipated continuing at that level after the pandemic.

Focus Group Quotes

Comments about handwashing behavior change during the COVID-19 pandemic

“I have basically changed my hand washing technique based on the kind of guideline like 20 second, all the different ways until you get every different part of your hands clean. I’m sure I think that will continue” (Male, 25-34, May 2020).

“So, when I was at work, I have this peer pressure. You’re around people, and in a public restroom you must do the full hand wash . . . I was just pretty much a water-and-go person here in the house, and now I’m doing the whole happy birthday song with soap” (Female, 45-54, May 2020).

Comments about produce cleaning behavior change during the COVID-19 pandemic

“I’m not really taking many measures past spraying down packages and spraying down fruits and vegetables with 100% white vinegar in a spray bottle. Just from what I know, that will be enough within a minute or two to kill the virus.” (Male, 45-54, May 2020)

“I just have nightmares of people going into stores touching everything and leaving it behind for someone else. . . . making sure that I take care of any fruit or vegetables. Even my bananas before I eat them” (Female, 65+, May 2020).

Recommendations

- Food safety educators should provide science-based materials to ensure consumers are staying safe and not harming themselves by mishandling foods.
- Food safety educators can take advantage of consumer attention to preventative practices during a major health event to emphasize that these practices can also prevent foodborne illness.
- Government agencies can add food handling practices to COVID-19 preventative measures (with the emphasis that it is not foodborne) to ensure consumers are not harming themselves by using unsafe methods.

Acknowledgements

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Reference

- International Food Information Council. 2020. COVID-19 Pandemic transforms the way we shop, eat and think about food, according to IFIC’s 2020 Food & Health Survey. Available at: <https://foodinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-Food-and-Health-Survey-.pdf>. Accessed 10 June 2020.