

Japan convenience stores use plastic sheets for social distancing

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Pharmacy employees help customers from behind the protection of plastic curtains as a preventive measure to stop the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus in Tokyo on Monday. (AFP photo)

TOKYO: Some of Japan's ubiquitous convenience stores have taken a novel approach to social distancing by hanging plastic sheets from the ceiling to provide a barrier between customers and staff at the cash register during the coronavirus pandemic.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared a state of emergency in Tokyo and six other prefectures last week in response to the coronavirus outbreak. While many businesses in

Tokyo and elsewhere are now shut, most convenience stores have stayed open as they are considered essential.

There are around 58,000 convenience stores throughout Japan. Most are open 24 hours and sell everything from pre-made bento lunches to beer and neckties. They also offer package delivery and bill payment services.

"I actually feel safer," said 53-year-old restaurant owner Isao Otsuka, who was shopping at one of the roughly 150 7-Eleven stores, mainly in Tokyo, that have installed the transparent plastic curtains.

7-Eleven's owner, Seven & i Holdings, has asked convenience store workers to wear masks, check their temperatures, wash their hands frequently and sterilise surfaces.

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The new coronavirus spreads from person to person through small droplets from the nose or mouth via coughing or sneezing, according to the World Health Organization. Scientists have also said the virus can remain infectious in droplets in the air for hours and on surfaces for days.

Japan had recorded 7,411 cases of infection and 138 deaths from the virus as of Monday, public broadcaster NHK said, with more than 2,000 cases in Tokyo, a sharp rise from late March.