

# Plastic packaging: Hero or villain in the coronavirus era?

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**Coronavirus has provoked the food packaging debate, with some using the crisis to hammer home the message that plastic is vital for protecting food from germs and extending its shelf life, while others stress that the pandemic highlights the fact that disposable plastic is unsustainable and a carrier of harmful bacteria.**



Big food – under pressure from campaigners and consumers – is currently on a mission to rethink plastic packaging and move towards a circular economy.

Nestle and Mondelez, for example, have both this month signed the European Plastics Pact. This is a commitment to make 100% of packaging recyclable or reusable and reduce the use of virgin plastic by one-third by 2025.

But where exactly does plastic sit in the time of coronavirus? Should it be celebrated as a vital tool for protecting food from contamination and avoiding food waste? Or is plastic the villain, providing a surface for the virus to survive? When a consumer buys a banana in the supermarket, is the banana safer in a bag or out of a bag? Once trivial questions have quickly become all consuming.

There is no current evidence of food or food packaging being associated with transmission of COVID-19, according to both the European and US food standards agencies. But that doesn't mean there's evidence it isn't. What if someone's sneezed on the banana? The FDA adds that, like other viruses, it is possible that COVID-19 can survive on surfaces or objects.

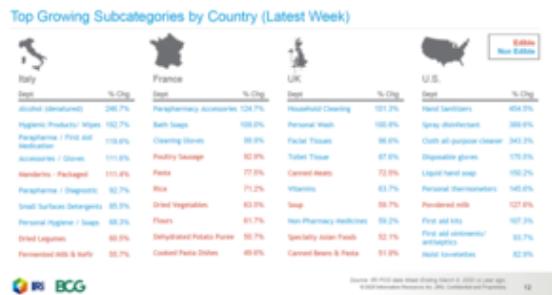
## Consumer demand for packaged goods is skyrocketing

Shopper spend in Europe for packaging in food products is soaring, according to data from IRI POS. In Italy, for instance, consumer spend on packaged mandarins rose over 111% in the week ending 8 March, versus the year-ago period. The knock-on is a jump in demand for plastics amid the virus pandemic, says Barry Turner, director of plastics and flexible packaging at the British Plastics Federation.

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Consumer spend on packaged foods has risen amid the virus crisis in Italy, France and the UK. Source: IRI POS w/e March 8, 2020

"We are seeing order volumes significantly higher depending on the category and the item," he told FoodNavigator. "We've seen a massive upswing from certain sectors – such as the NHS and all sorts of situations where food still has to be served within a closed environment – for the sort of things people have been calling on to be banned, so things like stirrers."

A ban on single-use plastic cutlery, cotton buds, straws and stirrers is set to come into force by 2021 in EU member states. The UK will introduce a new plastics packaging tax from April 2022. Manufacturers and importers will be charged £200 per tonne on packaging made from less than 30% recycled plastic.

Turner continued: "Items like plastic stirrers that politicians were calling for bans on now are in great demand due to hygiene considerations. For the moment, single use plastic benefits from a hygiene point of view."

## Shades of grey

Turner believes that during the crisis people have started to realise the role that plastic packing of all sorts plays in terms of keeping people safe. But a study released on March 13 claimed the [virus can survive on hard surfaces such as plastic](#) and stainless steel for up to 72 hours and on cardboard for up to 24 hours.

"This virus has the capability for remaining viable for days," said study author, James Lloyd-Smith, an assistant professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of California, Los Angeles, who researches how pathogens emerge.

In the US, the Plastics Industry Association has waded into the debate. It's written a letter to the US Department of Health and Human Services claiming that "*single-use plastic products are the most sanitary choice when it comes to many applications, especially the consumption and transport of food, whether purchased at a restaurant or at a grocery store.*"

The letter complained that plastic bag bans enforced in some US states are 'tying the hands of shoppers and retailers alike'. The body cited four pieces of evidence to support its view that reusable bags are the bad boys of the pandemic. "*Study after study after study have shown that reusable bags can carry viruses and bacteria, spread them throughout a grocery store, and live on surfaces for up to three days.*"

## Unprecedented and unclear times

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*their own benefit in such a way. The virus is already shown to last a third of the time on cardboard than on plastic and yet that industry is not using this as an opportunity to lobby or directly profit from the crisis."*

The science is not actually yet clear, she said. Members of the public, including those who are "historically supportive of the plastic reduction movement" are in "a state of confusion right now".

She added: "I don't understand the science of suddenly saying single-use plastic bags are the answer, when it's the cashier that's handing the bags over to you. The overriding message should be to own your own bag, keep it to yourself always, and wash your hands."

She believes the public has been waking up to realising that plastic packaging is 'devastating to the natural world'. "At a time when we are all fully realising the fragility of our societal, economic and environmental systems, we can also witness the Environmental Protection Agency in US lifting restrictions on industrial polluters. This huge backward slide a problem we are laying down for our near future, impacting our air, soil and water. Have we learned nothing from how to live in harmony with Nature?"

"We need to support and applaud those retailers who a continuing on their drive to reduce plastic because this crisis of covid will pass but we haven't even started to make a dent in the plastic pollution crisis."

"We're all learning about covid," echoed Turner. "The science is in a stage of catching up, I'd suggest. There have been some limited studies done on viruses and how long they stay on various surfaces but covid is very new to us all."

## **Food waste: a riddle, wrapped - or unwrapped? - in a mystery**

After the crisis, Turner wants the onus put on recycling and waste management to prevent plastic pollution. He added that with fresh food produce witnessing an 'extraordinary leap in demand' as people self-isolate in their homes, what would be a 'criminal outcome' would be if we wasted more food in the process.

"If you start wasting any of that food stuff then its impact on the environment in terms of its use of resources is far greater than the packaging. Far better to package it and extend its life than reduce the packaging and not."

But, again, the argument for plastic packaging as a panacea for preventing food waste and its resultant methane gases is not black and white. According to Sutherland, for example, food wrapped in plastic to prevent food waste is counterproductive because it encourages consumers to leave it for longer. It's much more likely to actually get eaten if not plastic wrapped, she believes.

She adds that recycling is not a solution to plastic pollution. "Our waste management and recycling systems will never cope with the extraordinary levels of waste we produce. Household collection does not mean it is actually recycled. Plastic is one of the least recycled materials in the UK and the reality is that this significant increase in plastic packaging will end up being landfilled, exported or incinerated. There is nothing circular or sustainable about that."

She's also concerned that [plummeting oil prices](#) will give plastic producers an excuse to 'find ways to sell even more of it'.

Her plea to consumers, meanwhile, is simply to avoid the temptation to hoard food.

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