

July 21, 2020

TIPS FOR SAFE USE OF REUSEABLE BAGS DURING COVID-19

On July 10, 2020, the Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MA DPH) rescinded a previous emergency order related to grocery stores and pharmacies that, in part, prohibited the use of reusable checkout bags by grocery stores and pharmacies and their patrons.

As such, as of July 10th, the MA DPH now permits the use of reusable bags and does not consider reusable bags to be a significant risk factor in the spread of COVID-19 due to the implementation of other grocery store and pharmacy specific requirements that are in place to reduce COVID-19 exposure. Given this news, the Bedford Board of Health wants to remind residents that it is still important for all to continue to follow best practices recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19 and other viral respiratory illnesses by cleaning and disinfecting common touch surfaces and hand washing frequently to prevent transmission. Follow these tips to help protect yourself and others when using reusable bags:

Best Practices

- Clean and disinfect reusable grocery bags often and after each use
- Do not use reusable grocery bags for other purposes. Bags used for groceries should be cleaned before and after use, and especially before and after if used for other purposes.
- Allow reusable bags to dry completely before storing or using.
- Store reusable bags in a cool, dry place away from other items or storage areas that may contaminate them.
- Check with stores if they have policies or procedures in place for the use of reusable bags.
- Consider bagging your own groceries when using reusable bags.
- Use hand sanitizer when leaving the store and before entering your car. Always wash your hands when you return home and after handling any surface touched by others.
- Remember food safety to prevent foodborne illness – Separate meat, fish, or poultry; fresh produce, and ready-to-eat foods. Dedicate one bag for each type of food. Remember to refrigerate foods within at least two hours of leaving the store and as soon as possible during the warmer weather. As a general rule discard any food left out longer than two hours (weather or room temperature dependent).

Cleaning and Disinfecting

This is a two-step process and both steps are equally as important. Cleaning refers to the removal of germs, dirt, and impurities from surfaces. Disinfecting refers to the use of chemicals such as EPA-registered disinfectants to kill germs or viruses on surfaces. Disinfecting does not clean dirty surfaces or remove germs, but by killing germs on a surface after cleaning, it can further lower the risk of spreading infection.

How to Clean Reusable Bags

Cleaning and Disinfecting Plastic and Nylon Bags

- Clean and scrub the inside and outside of the bag with warm soapy water and rinse and/or spray/wipe down the inside and outside of the bag with a diluted bleach solution or disinfecting product.
- Diluted household bleach solutions (at least 1000 ppm sodium hypochlorite, or concentration of 5%–6%) can be used if appropriate for the surface. Follow manufacturer’s instructions for application, ensuring a contact time of at least 1 minute, and allowing proper ventilation during and after application. Check to ensure the product is not past its expiration date. Never mix household bleach with ammonia or any other cleanser. Unexpired household bleach will be effective against coronaviruses when properly diluted. Prepare a bleach solution by mixing: 5 tablespoons (1/3rd cup) bleach per gallon of room temperature water or 4 teaspoons bleach per quart of room temperature water. Bleach solutions will be effective for disinfection up to 24 hours.

Cleaning Cloth Bags

- Wash in a washing machine with warm water and laundry detergent.
- Dry on the warmest setting possible or air-dry if needed.

When using any chemical, always follow manufacturer’s label instructions exactly as written to ensure safe and effective use. Never mix chemicals. Additional cleaning and disinfection information may be found at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cleaning-disinfection.html>

Additional information regarding COVID-19 may be found on the Bedford Board of Health website: <https://www.bedfordma.gov/bedford-board-of-health/pages/covid-19-coronavirus>