Health Expert Statement Addressing Safety of Reusables and COVID-19

Reuse and refill systems are an essential part of addressing the plastic pollution crisis and moving away from a fossil fuel-based economy. They can create jobs and help build local economies. The COVID-19 global pandemic has triggered a discussion of how to ensure the safety of reusable systems in a public health crisis. Based on the best available science and guidance from public health professionals, it is clear that reusable systems can be used safely by employing basic hygiene. Below are the key facts to keep in mind.

Available Evidence Indicates that the Virus Spreads Primarily from Inhaling Aerosolized Droplets, Rather than through Contact with Surfaces

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Preventions (CDC), “The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person...between people who are in close contact with one another, through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks.” ¹ While “it may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes,” aerosolized droplets are the only documented method of COVID-19 transmission to date.²

Disposable Products Present Similar Issues As Reusable Ones

Studies show that the COVID-19 virus can remain infectious on surfaces for varying times depending on the material. One study showed infectious virus lasted up to 24 hours on paper and cardboard and between 2-3 days on plastic and stainless steel.³⁴ In another study, infectious virus was not found on print or tissue paper after just three hours, whereas it was active up to 1 day on cloth, up to 3 days on glass, and 6 days on plastic and stainless steel.⁵ To prevent transmission through objects and surfaces, one can assume that any object or surface in a public space — reusable or disposable — could be contaminated with the virus. Single-use plastic is not inherently safer than reusables, and causes additional public health concerns once it is discarded.

⁴ https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247(20)30003-3/fulltext
⁵ https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247(20)30003-3/fulltext#coronavirus-linkback-ad
Reusable Products are Easily Cleaned

Most common approved household disinfectants⁶ should be effective for disinfecting hard surfaces, including reusable items, with such surfaces being cleaned thoroughly using a detergent or soap and hot water prior to disinfection if they are visibly dirty. Dishwashers and washing machines should be effective if operated according to manufacturers’ instructions and, in the case of laundry, using the warmest appropriate water setting for the items and drying items completely. Similarly, washing hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub, and then avoiding touching your eyes, mouth, or nose are effective ways to protect yourself.⁷ ⁸

Best Practices for Reusable Products in the Retail Space

1. Comply with food safety/ health codes. Within retail and foodservice, reusable plates, cutlery, cups, and napkins are governed by strict state food safety procedures outlined in health codes. Ware-washing at high temperatures with additional sanitizing procedures are standard in the industry and provide more than adequate protection against virus transmission.

2. Use additional hygienic practices for COVID. The bottom line is that reusable items are safe to use when cleaned with soap and water, and there is no substitute for thorough hygiene. Retail food establishments should follow Food and Drug Administration guidance regarding retail practices and COVID-19 safety.⁹

3. Employ contact-free systems for customers’ personal bags and cups. Systems in which there is no contact between the customer’s reusable cup, container or bag and retail surface areas can protect workers and provide a precautionary approach to addressing COVID-19 transmission. For example, California’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration recommends that “when customers bring their own bags, employees should be instructed to:

- Not touch or place groceries in customer brought bags.
- Ask customers to leave their own bags in the shopping cart.
- Ask customers to bag their own groceries

4. Ensure that workers are protected. In addition to investing in safe and accessible reusable systems, other steps retailers can take to protect workers include providing PPE, paid sick leave, reduced occupancy in stores, and requiring customers to wear masks and practice social distancing. Customers should handle their own reusable items when going to shops and stores.

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⁶ https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2
⁸ https://www.journalofhospitalinfection.com/article/S0195-6701(20)30046-3/fulltext
List of Signatories by Country/Region

Titles and affiliations are included to show the breadth and depth of expertise of signatories and are not included to imply endorsement by their employers.

Brazil

Dr. Saulo Delfino Barboza, PhD
Associate Professor Master Program in Health & Education University of Ribeirao Preto

Mexico

Dr. Kirvis J Torres
Poveda
Epidemiologist

Canada

Dr Joe Vipond
Emergency Physician - MD. Interim President, Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment

Joey Lee
Registered Nurse
Unity Health Toronto

Olga Hallborg, RN, MPH candidate
Registered Nurse Nelson Jubilee Manor

Laurence Guillaumie, PhD
Professor Université Laval

United States of America

Nickolas Zaller, PhD
Professor University of Arkansas for Medical Science

Dr. Steve Luby Professor of Medicine (Infectious Diseases and Geographic Medicine), Director of Research at the Center for Innovation in Global Health, Senior Fellow, Woods Institute for the Environment, Senior Fellow at Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies Stanford University

Dr. Tova Fuller Assistant Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry; Vice President University of California San Francisco, San Francisco Bay Area Physicians for Social Responsibility

Dr. Barbara Sattler, RN, DrPH, FAAN Professor, Public Health Program University of San Francisco

Dr. Paul English
Environmental Epidemiologist Public Health Institute Corinna Tempelis Research Scientist (retired and active) California Department of Public Health

Shellie L. Klimen, MSN PHN
Registered Nurse Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital
United States of America (cont.)

Michelle Bergen MSN
FNP-BC Nurse Practitioner
Saint Anges Medical Center

Kenna Lee, RN
Registered Nurse Memorial Hospital

Peggy da Silva, MPH
Training and Education Specialist
Consulting for Community

Kathleen Roe, DrPH, MPH Professor Emerita, Department of Health Science and Recreation San Jose State University

Jodi Sherman, MD
Associate Professor of Anesthesiology and Epidemiology in Environmental Health Sciences, Director, Program in Healthcare Environmental Sustainability (PHES) Yale University

John Nwangwu
Professor of Epidemiology & Global Health
Southern Connecticut State University

Mark Miller
Former Director of Research Fogarty International Center
NIH

Linda Birnbaum
Retired Director
National Institute of Health Sciences

Dr. Anthony Panzera, PhD, MPH Adjunct Professor
American University

Dr. Lisa Jordan, PhD, RN, CNE
Retired Nurse Member of ANHE, IAHC, and DC/MD League for Nursing

Dr. Laura Anderko PhD RN
Robert and Kathleen Scanlon Endowed Chair in Values Based Health Care & Professor Georgetown University School of Nursing and Health Studies

Alan Becker, Ph.D.
Professor, Environmental and Occupational Health Florida A&M University

Warren Lavey
Adjunct Associate Professor University of Illinois

Sarah Patrick
Assistant Professor, Public Health Southern Illinois University, Carbondale
Gloria E. Barrera, MSN, RN, PEL-CSN
President Elect Illinois Association of School Nurses

Gloria E. Barrera, MSN, RN, PEL-CSN
President Elect Illinois Association of School Nurses

Jennifer Gray Ph.D
Associate Professor Northern Illinois University
Scott Cassel Chief Executive Officer/Founder Product Stewardship Institute, Inc.

Sydney Harris
Sr. Associate, Policy and Programs Product Stewardship Institute, Inc.
Scott Cassel
Chief Executive Officer/Founder Product
Stewardship Institute, Inc.

Nate Horwitz-Willis, DrPH, MPH, MPA
Assistant Professor, Public Health & Coordinator of Public Health Practice
Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences

Jean Flatley McGuire, PhD
Professor of Practice, Health Sciences
Department Northeastern University

Dr. Shira Fischer
Physician Policy Researcher RAND Corporation

Dr. Suzanne Cashman, ScD, MS
Professor and Director of Community Health University of Massachusetts Medical School

Greylin Nielsen, MPH
Doctoral Student Boston University School of Public Health

Dr. Harlee Strauss, PhD
Retired, Consultant in Toxicology and Risk Assessment H Strauss Associates, Inc.

Pietra Check, MPH
Course Educator Boston University Medical School

Phil Brown
University Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Health Sciences Director, Social Science
Environmental Health Research Institute Northeastern University

Lindsay Tallon, PhD, MSPH, CPH
Assistant Professor of Public Health Assistant Director, Master of Public Health Program Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences

Craig Slatin
Professor Emeritus University of Massachusetts, Lowell

Dr. Marie O'Neill
Professor of Environmental Health Sciences and Epidemiology University of Michigan School of Public Health

Laura Senier, PhD, MPH
Associate Professor Northeastern University Bouvé College of Health Sciences

Joseph Eisenberg
Professor and Chair of the Department of Epidemiology University of Michigan

Renee Crichlow MD, FAAFP
Director of Advocacy and Policy University of Minnesota, School of Medicine

Marjorie McCullagh, PhD, RN
Professor University of Michigan School of Nursing
Dr. Robyn Gilden  
Assistant Professor University of  
MD School of Nursing

Dr. Kolapo DaSilva  
Emergency Physician

Megan Latshaw  
Associate Scientist  
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Kayla Meza, MPH  
Research Assistant  
ASlso

Dr. Richard Cote  
Professor and Chair, Department of  
Pathology & Immunology Washington  
University School of Medicine in St. Louis

Lise Saffran  
Assistant Teaching Professor University of  
Missouri Department of Public Health

Louis Mansky, PhD  
Director, Institute for Molecular Virology  
University of Minnesota Medical School

Greg Kearney, DrPH, MPH, REHS  
Associate Professor and Program Director,  
DrPH Environmental & Occupational  
Health East Carolina University

Dr. Beth Rosenberg  
Associate Professor of Public Health and  
Community Medicine Co-Chair, Public  
Health Admissions Committee Tufts  
University School of Medicine

Anthony L. Schlaff, MD, MPH  
Director, Public Health Program  
Tufts University School of  
Medicine

Dr. Bernadette M. Longo, PhD, RN,  
FAAN Chair of the Environmental Health  
Committee Nevada Nurses Association

Mary Guinan, MD, Ph.D.  
Founding Dean Emerita School of  
Public Health, University of Nevada,  
Las Vegas

Kathryn J Carey BSN RN CMSN RN-BC  
Clinical Nurse III New York Presbyterian  
Hospital, Columbia University Irving  
Medical Center

Anthony J. Santella, DrPH, MCHES,  
Adv Cert  
Associate Professor of Public Health  
Hofstra University

Dr. Richard Novick, MD  
Recanati Professor of Science, Emeritus,  
Member, National Academy of Sciences,  
Departments of Medicine and  
Microbiology NYU School of Medicine

Jilliann Elliott  
Associate Professor,  
Environmental Medicine and Public  
Health Mount Sinai

Sergios-Orestis Kolokotronis, PhD  
Assistant Professor SUNY Downstate Health  
Sciences University
Michele Okoh  
Senior Lecturing Fellow  
Duke Environmental Law and Policy Clinic

Leslie Elliott, Ph.D., MPH  
Clinical Associate  
Professor University of Nevada, Reno

Justus B. Cohen, PhD  
Assistant Professor, Department of Microbiology and Molecular Genetics  
University of Pittsburgh, School of Medicine

Michael P. Koster, MD, FAAP  
Division Director, Pediatric Infectious Diseases, Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Alpert Medical School of Brown University, Attending Physician, Division of Pediatric Hospital Medicine and Infectious Diseases Brown University

Kelly Bouthillet DNP, APRN, CCNS,ACNP-BC  
Acute Care NP & Clinical Nurse Specialist Adjunct Nursing Faculty, University of SC, Beaufort President, South Carolina Nurses Association Hilton Head Regional Healthcare

Dr. John Robert Koethe  
Associate Professor Vanderbilt University Medical Center

Arsham Alamian, PhD, MSc, FACE  
Associate Professor of Epidemiology Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology Director, Master of Public Health Program East Tennessee State University

Phillip Scheuerman  
Professor East Tennessee State University College of Public Health

Bruce Jennings  
Senior Fellow, Center for Humans and Nature, Adjunct Associate Professor, Senior Advisor at the Hastings Center Vanderbilt University

Chunrong Jia, PhD  
Associate Professor of Environmental Health  
University of Memphis

Julian Leibowitz, M.D.Ph.D.  
Director, MD/PhD Program Professor of Microbial Pathogenesis and Immunology Texas A&M University HSC College of Medicine

Hua Zhao, Ph.D.  
Professor The Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine

Patrick O. Pithua, BVM, MSc, PhD, DLSHTM  
Associate Professor Virginia Tech

Dr. James Conway, MD, FAAP  
Professor of Pediatrics Pediatric Infectious Diseases Fellowship Program Director  
Director, SMPH Office of Global Health  
Associate Director, UW-Madison Global Health Institute Medical Director - UW Health Immunization Program University of Wisconsin – Madison, School of Medicine & Public Health
Tran Huynh
Assistant Professor of Environmental and Occupational Health
Drexel University School of Public Health

Dr. Darci Martinz DNP & FNP candidate, BSN, RN
Public Health Administrator Community Leadership Academy/Victory Prepatory Academy

Dr. Ben Locwin
Healthcare Executive (Pharmaceutics and Vaccines), State Public Advisor State Science & Public Health Task Force, Senate Office Advisory Panel

Anne Katten
Pesticide and Work Safety Project Director
CRLA Foundation

Elgin Avila MPH, CPH
Founder/Principal Investigator
Equitable Health Solutions, LLC

Dr. Krista Farey
Staff Physician Contra Costa County Health Services

Richard Rothenberg
Regents' Professor Georgia State University School of Public Health

Dr. Lisa Jordan
Associate Teaching Professor, Biology Department Drew University

Erika Halsey, MPH
APHA member, Climate and Health Subtopic Committee

Dr. Shanda Demorest, DNP, RN Member Engagement Manager Practice Greenhealth

Katheryn Cortes, BSN, RN, OCN
Registered Nurse Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center

Ralph Brindis MD, MPH
Clinical Professor of Medicine University of California, San Francisco

Laura D. Kramer
Professor of Biomedical Sciences University at Albany, School of Public Health

Jeffrey E. Korte PhD
Rosemary Valedes Chaudry, PhD, MPH, RN
Retired RN, Public Health

Austria

Dr. Hans-Peter Hunter
Deputy Head and Senior Scientist Department of Environmental Health, Medical University of Vienna.

France

Dr. Barbara Demeneix
Professor Comparative Physiology Laboratory, National History Museum, Paris United Kingdom
United Kingdom

Dr. Jennifer Cole
Research Fellow, AMR
University of London

Prof. Tamara Galloway
Ecotoxicology, University of Exeter

Prof. Charlotte Williams
Professor of Chemistry
Oxford University

Italy

Ferdinando Laghi, MD
President International Society of Doctors for the Environment

Dr. Monica Zoppé
Research Scientist
CNR

Vittore Casarosa
Senior Research Associate
CNR-ISTI

Liliana Cori
Research Technologist Institute of Clinical Physiology, National Research Council, Italy IFC-CNR

Dr. Agostino Di Ciaula, MD
Internist President of the Scientific Committee International Society of Doctors for Environment (ISDE) – Italy

Dr. Stefani Gatti
Presidente APS Comunità Interattive-Officina per la Partecipazione AIP2

Dr. Susan George
ex Head of Course on Business, Public and NGO Communication Pisa University

Cyprus

Dr. Konstantinos Makris
Associate Professor of Environmental Health, Director of Water and Health Laboratory Cyprus University of Technology, Cyprus International Institute for Environmental and Public Health

Greece

Vini Dimitra
Paediatrician, MSc, Director of Thalassaemia Unit General Hospital of Nikaia

Lia Patsavoudi, Ph.D.
Professor of Biology Dept. of Biomedical Engineering, University of West Attica

Uganda

Dr. Iddi Matovu
Program Manager-DREAMS Rakai Health Sciences Program-RHSP

Dr. Fred Nalugoda, S. Stat, MHS
Director of Kalisizo Field Station, Junior Principal Investigator Rakai Health Sciences Program-RHSP
Dr. Godfrey Kigozi, MBChB, MPH  
Medical Officer, Junior Principal Investigator  
Rakai Health Sciences Program-RHSP  

Malawi  

Vita Mithi  
Researcher and Public Health Professional  
Knowledge Action Change  

Tunisia  

Semia Gharbi  
Teacher and expert in science and management of environment  
AEEFG  

South Africa  

Rico Euripidou  
Environmental Health Campaign Manager  
groundwork  

Philippines  

Dr. Geminn Louis C. Apostol  
Professor and Lead Environmental Health Specialist, Ateneo School of Medicine and Public Health Ateneo School of Medicine and Public Health  

Malaysia  

Dr. Sharifah Norkhadijah Syed Ismail  
Senior Lecturer, Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  

Taiwan  

Tsu-Nai Wang  
Professor, Department of Public Health, College of Health Science, Kaohsiung Medical University, Kaohsiung  

Dr. Pei-Shih Chen, PhD  
Chair, Professor of Public Health  
Kaohsiung Medical University  

Guey Chuen Perng, PhD  
Professor, Department of Microbiology and Immunology College of Medicine, National Cheng Kung University  

Switzerland  

Jane Muncke  
Chief Scientific Officer  
Food Packaging Forum