

Staying Safe in the Cab During the COVID-19 Pandemic

John Shutske, University of Wisconsin-Extension

With the COVID-19 illness dominating news cycles, how do tractor, truck, and other ag equipment operators minimize their risk – especially when the same machine is being operated by multiple people? COVID-19 spreads easily from person to person. But, it is not believed to be transferred over significant outdoor distances. In fact, health experts still believe risk is significantly reduced even by people who are together outdoors if they stay more than 6 feet apart. So, if you are operating a tractor in a farm field and are healthy, you are at near zero risk from person-to-person spread if you're alone. However, almost all operators do come in some contact with visitors, ag service personnel, hired employees, and other people. The virus can be spread by a person who does not appear or “know” they are sick – or they may have acquired the virus but not yet show symptoms. This is what health professionals are calling “asymptomatic” individuals.

So, during this time when many people are staying home and working in isolated locations, it's good, if you are a farmer or other ag professional, to limit contact with others by transacting business as much as possible by telephone/text messaging/email, limiting contact with visitors, and, if you **MUST** spend time in direct contact with non-family members, keeping a 6 foot separation distance.

The other possible situation that may lead to exposure is having multiple operators of the same tractor over the course of a season. **Here are some things to reduce risks if equipment is being used by multiple operators:**

1. Know COVID-19 symptoms and **DO NOT** allow workers on the farm if they are sick or have known exposure to others who had the virus in the last 14 days. Common symptoms from CDC include: cough and shortness of breath. Other symptoms can include fever, chills, repeated shaking with chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, and/or new loss of taste or smell.
2. Anyone who suspects they are sick should call their clinic to determine next steps. They should **NOT** come to the farm as they can spread the illness. Some farms are asking everyone to check body temperature each morning and report it before showing up for work. This is also a good time to review (or create) a “sick leave” policy. Many are incentivized to show up to work even if they feel sick because they need a paycheck.
3. Shared equipment should be cleaned between operators. Some specifics include:
 - Start each workday with clean and laundered clothing – normal machine washing with laundry detergent with warm or hot water and heated drying will kill the virus. Operators should shower since their last contact with the “public” and/or since their last work shift.
 - Between operators – if possible, leave cab windows/doors as open as possible (as long as the machine is parked in a secure location). Wind blowing through the cab will help clear the air in the cab. Direct exposure to UV light in bright sunshine will also be helpful, though it will not impact virus particles in shaded areas or if sunlight is shining through glass.
 - As you approach a vehicle – consider **EVERY** part that may have been touched by the last operator, including handholds, fuel tank caps, ladders, oil dipsticks, steering wheel, and door handles. These should be wiped down thoroughly. Consider wiping down hitches, wagon tongues, and hitch pins on equipment. When cleaning, wear waterproof protective gloves – remove and store them carefully when cleaning is complete.



- Several options exist for cleaning. The virus is broken down with soapy warm water and a wet cloth, antibacterial “wipes,” or other commercial spray cleaners listed as antibacterial/antimicrobial. Another option that kills the virus is a diluted bleach/water solution. CDC recommends $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of household bleach per gallon of water OR 4 teaspoons of bleach per quart of water applied generously through a spray bottle. Bleach/water solution should ONLY be applied to hard, non-porous surfaces. When bleach-water solution is used, it should be sprayed on and allowed to dry. Never apply bleach directly to cloth, fabric, electronic components, the operator’s panel, touch screens, etc. While bleach/water is effective against the virus, it may permanently stain clothing and other fabric.



- Windows can be wiped down with warm, soapy water and then finished with window cleaner (most consumer window cleaning products are not approved as disinfectants – but if wiped down first with soapy water, you can finish the job with them).
- Do not use harsh cleaners on electronic parts, touch screens, or other components. Check the operator’s manual. Consider carrying cleaning wipes with isopropyl alcohol (which kills the virus) to wipe down these parts.

- Once things are wiped down in the cab, remove and store protective gloves and use some gel or foam hand sanitizer. If you keep hand sanitizer in the cab (recommended), keep it out of direct sunlight. Over time, some alcohol will evaporate.



- Consider more frequent cab air filter changeouts – most air handling systems are bringing in and filtering outside air. While there are no known concerns about these filters spreading virus, air movement in the cab during operation is important and a clean filter will help ensure maximum airflow and comfort for the operator.
- With all of these precautions, some operators are also purchasing and using a bundle of thick cotton work gloves they can wear – changing gloves frequently between tasks (like hitching/unhitching) or touching any surface not known for sure to have been cleaned. A bundle of a dozen pairs of gloves can be purchased for under \$15. Used and dirty cotton gloves can then be thrown into a sealed plastic bag and laundered each night with work clothes. DO not use cloth gloves for tasks involving liquids/wet conditions. Never use leather gloves for virus protection – they cannot be laundered and could harbor the virus. Waterproof gloves will also provide protection and should be used during cleaning, but are not durable and are not comfortable for long-term use for most people.
- While hand sanitizers deactivate and kill the virus, nothing beats handwashing. Wash with soap, warm water, and scrub thoroughly for at least 20 seconds. Get all areas (knuckles, fingernails, around rings, etc.). Dry with a CLEAN paper towel.

Staying safe and healthy during these times requires you to think like a “CSI investigator” and consider how and where the virus might spread. It takes a little bit of extra work and care, but your health is vital, and our growing world population needs you!