

## Health & Safety compliance in 2023

# Food Safety first, despite massive power challenges

**H**ealth and safety compliance is one of the key pillars of the South African FMCG retail sector – and supermarkets and wholesalers, as a crucial link in the food supply chain, have a critical role to play in ensuring the safety of the food they sell, and the environment in which it is sold. Multiple legislative and certification requirements – quite rightly – govern FMCG retail and wholesale stores and all aspects of their operations, including the safety of their staff and customers in a clean and hygienic workplace.

South African retailers and consumers have barely come through the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic with its own barrage of health and safety restrictions, and already face another threat in the form of escalated loadshedding.

Loadshedding impacts every aspect of a store's health and safety compliance, but in the scramble to deal with the daily occurrences of power outages and to become autonomous from Eskom supply, could Covid-19 hygiene best practices be receding into the past?

Various operational challenges are piling up for local retailers as they look for ways to keep their refrigerators cold, frozen foods frozen, fresh



[www.freshproduce.com/resources/food-safety/](http://www.freshproduce.com/resources/food-safety/).jpg

produce fresh and in-store circulation and air quality at optimum levels. And loadshedding or not, health and safety compliance goes on, which means workload and monetary output to remain compliant has increased significantly.

While the Covid pandemic was certainly challenging from an operational perspective, especially during total and partial lockdowns, food safety was never really at risk from the respiratory disease. (food security became a perceived risk from a consumer point of view). Supermarket and wholesale retailers weathered the storm and, in true resilient South African fashion, adapted, adjusted, and found ways to differentiate, innovate and continued to trade.

But the current power crisis is an altogether different animal. Not only is it forcing many supermarkets and retailers to spend exorbitant amounts on alternative energy sources, it's also posing challenges for maintaining food safety standards.

### Food safety

According to Hahn & Hahn Attorneys, there is no single food law that governs food safety compliance. "The Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act, Agricultural Products Standards Act, Meat Safety Act,



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and the Consumer Protection Act can be relevant,” says their website.

The Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act (54/1972) governs general hygiene requirements for food premises, transport of food and related matters.

Each Act has various regulations that may apply to retailers and wholesalers and some of these may overlap.

On top of this, “grocery stores that produce fresh and cooked foods in-store are required to follow the same food safety procedures as restaurants and other food-serving businesses and can apply... HACCP [safety principles] adapted to the specific condition” ([www.rentokil.com/blog/](http://www.rentokil.com/blog/)). HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points) is an internationally recognised food safety system that identifies hazards in the food handling process, develops and implement controls, and reduces risk.

Food safety compliance for retail stores selling foodstuffs is a massive and ongoing undertaking.

### Food safety and temperature control

When it comes to food safety, one of the biggest challenges for retailers is the need to maintain temperature control. Certain types of food, such as meat, dairy, and fresh produce, require specific temperatures to prevent bacterial growth and spoilage.

In addition, many products, such as frozen foods and ice cream, must be kept at a constant temperature to maintain their quality. Without reliable power supply, it can be difficult for retailers

## Cook Meat and Eggs to Safe Internal Temperatures

[www.cdc.gov/foodsafety](http://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety)

<p><b>145°F</b></p> <p>Pork Roast      Rack of Lamb</p> <p>Beef Brisket</p> <p>After cooking, let meat rest for 3 minutes before serving</p>	<p><b>160°F</b></p> <p>Ground Beef</p> <p>Egg Dish</p>	<p><b>165°F</b></p> <p>Ground Turkey      Turkey</p> <p>Chicken      Leftovers</p>
<p><b>145°F</b></p> <p>Fish Fillet</p>		

[www.cdc.gov/foodsafety](http://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety)

to maintain consistent temperature control. Power outages, brownouts, and fluctuations in voltage can all compromise the safety and quality of food products.

For community supermarket giant SPAR, food safety has – and will continue to be – the first priority, above everything else. According to SPAR’s Rob De Vos, Executive, South Rand Corporate Stores, while the pandemic cast a light on a different type of health challenge, with Covid-19 being a respiratory illness, food safety remained a constant focus across the supermarket and wholesale landscape.

“While it’s important to keep an eye on Covid-era

health protocols, both in-store as part of our ongoing operations but also for consumers at home, there’s no question that part of the focus now has to shift to managing the impact of the power crisis,” says De Vos.

### Health and safety, food safety and the risk of contamination

Another challenge is the risk of contamination. Ever since the damaging listeriosis outbreak of 2017 and 2018 that saw almost 4 000 tonnes of produce destroyed and resulted in the deaths of more than 200 people, food contamination has been firmly in the spotlight.

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To minimise the risk of contamination, retailers must ensure that their products are stored, handled, and displayed in a sanitary manner. This may involve regular cleaning and disinfection of equipment and surfaces, as well as proper storage of products to prevent cross-contamination.

Maintaining a sanitary environment can be challenging without a reliable power supply. Many cleaning and disinfection processes rely on electricity, such as the use of electric floor scrubbers and UV lights. In addition, refrigeration and freezer units may need to be defrosted periodically to prevent the buildup of ice and bacteria.

Without power, these tasks become much more difficult, if not impossible. In some cases, retailers may be forced to dispose of entire batches of food products if they cannot ensure their safety.

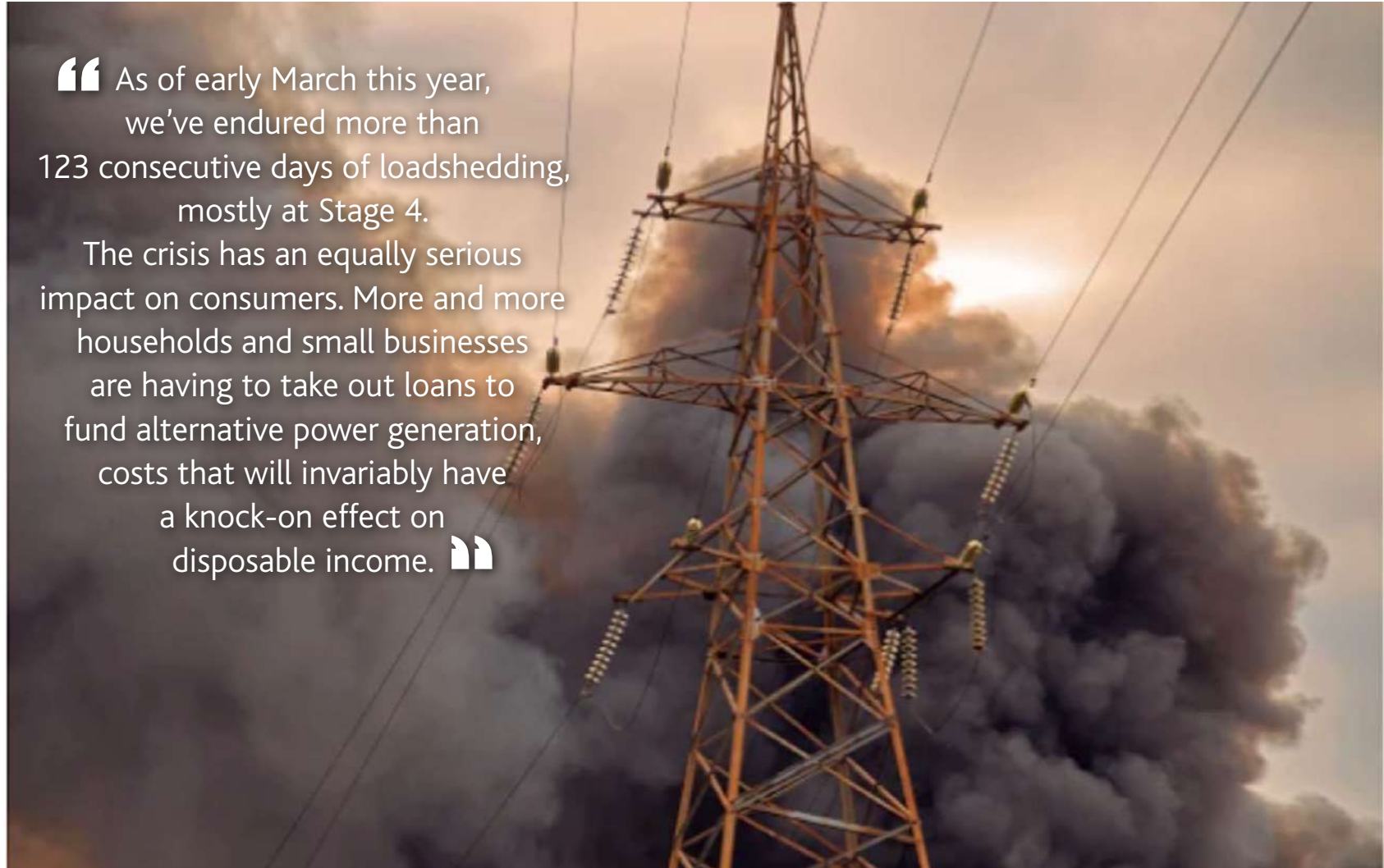
### The impact of loadshedding and finding solutions

The country is in the midst of its toughest period of loadshedding since the word became part of the common vernacular – as of early March this year, we’ve endured more than 123 consecutive days of loadshedding, mostly at Stage 4.

As if that isn’t enough, the crisis has an equally serious impact on consumers. More and more households and small businesses are having to take out loans to fund alternative power generation, costs that will invariably have a knock-on effect on disposable income.

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businessstech.co.za/news/energy/



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the fridges running cold,” says De Vos. “No landlord or retailer, no matter how big, has access to all the backup and power generation equipment required to run entire stores as they would when the lights are on, every day and through the night. Even the equipment we do have is just not designed for it.”

The threat for many retailers is regular breakdowns in the electrified equipment so critical for maintaining health and safety and food safety levels: cold storage, refrigeration, and HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning).

The power crisis impacts every part of the retail ecosystem, but it’s the critical parts responsible

for maintaining food safety levels that are most at risk, for example, fresh produce that has been insufficiently cooled and that would normally be removed from shelves, to slip through cracks.

“For us it’s not just about reducing the large amount of additional wastage due to power outages across the chain, but rather finding smarter solutions so that wastage doesn’t happen in the first place,” says De Vos.

“We’re working from a consistency and food safety perspective, buying in pre-packed fresh produce such as lettuce and other fruit and vegetable produce, with sell by and use by dates clearly marked,” he says.



“This is happening throughout our stores, not only in fresh produce, bakeries and butcheries, but increasingly also in our deli sections with pre-packed ready-to-eat meals. We’ve recently launched a range of products that get delivered to store pre-packaged, which is much easier to manage under these conditions.”



Image courtesy of C. Sittisak, Pexels

### Food safety and the cold chain

No matter what, the cold chain must be maintained, which is why a worsening of the power crisis is of real concern. Just this month, South Africa’s biggest retailer Shoprite Holdings posted strong

sales growth, but also that it spent R560 million for the six months ended January 2023 on diesel for generators, which is over and above the company’s R2 billion yearly electricity bill ([www.iol.co.za/business-report](http://www.iol.co.za/business-report)).

Another major retailer, Pick n Pay, is spending upwards of R60 million each month to keep generators working during trading hours, and company representatives have been quoted as saying this is the “permanent new reality” for South Africa (<https://businesstech.co.za>).

Likewise, Woolworths spent R90 million in the 26-week period up to December 2022 to combat the effects of load shedding, particularly on its cold stores (<https://businesstech.co.za>). In a statement, the company said that its priority is protecting the quality and ‘integrity’ of its cold chain. “We have made significant past investments in our energy supply capabilities, with 99% of our stores and all our distribution centres already equipped with generator capacity.”

De Vos says finding the right solutions is not easy, and that no-one has all the answers just yet. “Solar is one option, but that largely depends on investment by landlords, which is why we’ve been working closely with our landlords so that we’re all on the same page in that regard,” he says.

“Then there’s the challenge of ensuring the generator, electrical supply and solar panels all work together properly and efficiently to deliver the most cost-effective mix,” he adds. “I don’t think any of us really believe the storm will pass by the end of the year, or even in two years, but if you

don’t do what you have to do today, your doors won’t be open tomorrow.”



[nationaltoday.com](http://nationaltoday.com)\_world food safety day

### Sanitisation and health hygiene

While retailers and wholesalers work hard to mitigate the impact of loadshedding, keep their businesses viable, keep food fresh and safe to eat, and keep the workplace safe for their employees, there is still sanitisation and health hygiene to be considered.

With Covid restrictions all but lifted, a certain complacency has set in, not just for consumers, but also retailers, to the point where the strict hygiene protocols consumers had to follow during the pandemic are slowly falling by the wayside.

We’re seeing telltale signs that the healthy hygiene habits that have been drummed into the

collective psyche for the last few years are starting to wane. Whether it's a case of complacency now that the immediate threat is no longer there, or a sense of 'liberation' from the routine of mask wearing, hand spraying and trolley wiping at almost every retail entry point, the question remains about the standards of store-entry hygiene.

"Back in 2005 nobody really saw the need for things like trolley wipes, and sanitary hand wipes were mainly limited to medical applications," says Annette Devenish, marketing executive for hand and surface wipe manufacturer Sani-touch. "Covid saw the market surge more than 500%, but with Covid legislation in the past, retailers are faced with an even bigger challenge – prioritising spend, when they have to spend so much more just to do business, which invariably is going to impact the provision of 'complimentary' products like wipes."

The good news, says Devenish, is that hygiene is already at a very high level, and consumers are far more aware of their own responsibilities for in-store hygiene than they were pre-Covid.

"From our perspective, the market for sanitary wipes is down to pre-Covid levels, but that doesn't

necessarily mean hygiene standards are dropping, it just means easy access to freely-available in-store sanitation is back to 'normal'," she adds.

"The biggest stores are still offering trolley wipes as standard, and we're working with at least one conscientious retailer who's committed to recycling up to 70% of the trolley wipes they issue. However, on the whole, I'm not surprised their focus has shifted to more pressing matters."

### Keeping hygiene top of mind

What can stores do to keep hygiene front of mind while necessarily having to scale back on what they can offer their customers in-store?

Most South African retailers offered some of sanitary wipe during Covid, and should continue to do so, especially at till points. Now that more companies are manufacturing wipes, supply is no longer an issue. It would also be short sighted for retailers to stop offering some sort of hygiene protection at the storefront. Trolley wipes are still standard issue, by and large, but the debate here is about visibility and making hygiene protocols an accepted part of a shopping trip for consumers.

"Our job as suppliers is literally to put hygiene in hands of the consumer, but we need the buy-in from retailers to make it happen," says Devenish.

In terms of sustainability, says Devenish, "One thing we're passionate about is recycling, and we have had some success with our largest client, colour matching trolley wipes to their brand, and getting their commitment to recycle up to 70% of their in-store wipes. That seems to have struck a chord with consumers that are likewise environmentally conscious, and is just one idea that is working for keeping hygiene relevant when there's so much else going on."

De Vos concurs ...

“We can't tell customers how to behave, but the way we behave in our stores and the examples we set, I believe will set the tone for consumer behaviour too.”

"If we have sanitisers available and demonstrate the food safety habits entrenched in our operations, that will also set the tone for our customers, and I can already see that happening in our stores."



Image courtesy of FoodSafety.gov

# Health & safety: A quick refresher

**H**ealth and safety compliance in a supermarket or wholesale environment is all about good planning, discipline, and ensuring your staff are fully briefed, trained, and prepared for any eventuality. Extra vigilance should be given during times of power outages to avoid injuries to staff and customers. This includes ...

## Good housekeeping to minimise slips and falls

- Keep aisles free of boxes and trolleys while replenishing stock.
- Use safety signage.
- Maintain all floors, steps, slopes and ramps in a good condition.
- Keep floors dry at all times. Install absorbent mats at entrances to soak up rainwater.
- Repair holes in floors immediately.

## Cleaning

- Always follow the manufacturer's instructions when using cleaning chemicals.
- Your employees always need to wear protective gloves and use the correct cleaning equipment.
- Store cleaning materials correctly.
- All cleaning activities to be logged.

## Handling and moving stock

- Procedures for safe deliveries and collections.
- Safe lifting and handling techniques.
- Store heavy items at an appropriate height.

## Working at height

- Provide stable ladders for your staff.
- Train staff how to work at height – not overreaching, wearing correct footwear, not placing ladders on uneven surfaces.

## Working environment

- Temperatures must be comfortable.
- Limit time in cold rooms.
- Clean fresh air at all times.
- Establish a procedure for staff to report feeling unwell because of working conditions.
- Provide the correct equipment, clothing and items required for each department's specific needs.

## Shop equipment

- Staff to report any equipment not in good working order, both in-store and back office.
- Organise electrical safety checks to prevent the possibility of fire.
- Evaluate the risk of injury from broken fixtures.
- Repair, replace or remove defective equipment.

Ensure your staff are fully briefed about the limitations of your store during loadshedding. Consult with your department heads about the health and safety challenges and difficulties they face during power outages and prioritise solutions for the most urgent items first. Extra vigilance should be given to the following ...

**Lighting (store):** Make sure you have sufficient lighting to avoid customer slips and falls.

**Lighting (back of house, restrooms):** check the lighting in these areas. Too often customers find restrooms in total darkness, which is a potential safety hazard.

**Floors must be clean and dry**, especially in areas that may not be as well-lit during loadshedding, to avoid trip hazards.

## For wholesalers, avoid stocking high shelving

where the lighting might be compromised during the loadshedding period.

**Store security to be extra alert** during loadshedding. **SR**

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