

Safe Handling of Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

Fruits and vegetables are an important part of a healthy diet. Your local markets carry an amazing variety of fresh fruits and vegetables that are both nutritious and delicious. As you enjoy fresh produce and fresh-squeezed fruit and vegetable juices, it's important to handle these products safely in order to reduce the risks of foodborne illness.

How does contamination of produce occur?

Fruits and vegetables can be contaminated by bacteria present in the soil or water where they are grown. Fresh produce may also become contaminated after it is harvested, such as during preparation and storage. Eating contaminated produce (or juice made from contaminated produce) can lead to foodborne illness.

Buying tips for fresh produce:

- Purchase produce that is not bruised or damaged.
- When selecting fresh cut produce (i.e. fresh cut watermelon, mixed salad greens), choose only those items that are refrigerated or surrounded by ice.
- Bag fresh fruits and vegetables separately from meat, poultry, and seafood products when packing them to take home from the market.

Storage tips for fresh produce:

- Certain perishable fresh fruits and vegetables (i.e. strawberries, lettuce, herbs, mushrooms) can be best maintained by storing in a refrigerator at a temperature at 40°F or below. If you are unsure whether an item should be refrigerated, ask your grocer.
- All produce that is purchased pre-cut or peeled should be refrigerated to maintain both quality and safety.

Preparation tips for fresh produce:

- Always wash your hands for 20 seconds with warm water and soap before and after preparing fresh produce.
- Cut away any damaged or bruised areas on fresh fruit and vegetables before preparing and/or eating. Produce that looks rotten should be discarded.
- All produce should be thoroughly washed before eating. Wash under running water prior to eating, cutting, or cooking. Even if you plan to peel the produce before eating, it is still important to wash it first.
- Washing fruits and vegetables with soap or detergent or using commercial produce washes is not recommended.
- Scrub firm produce, such as melons and cucumbers, with a clean produce brush.
- Drying produce with a clean cloth towel or paper towel may further reduce bacteria that may be present.
- If an item is pre-washed, it will be stated on the package and can be used without further washing. However, pre-cut or pre-washed produce stored in open bags should be washed before using.

Health risks with raw sprouts

Raw sprouts that are served on salads, wraps, and sandwiches may contain bacteria that can cause foodborne illness. Rinsing sprouts first will not remove bacteria. To reduce the risk of illness, do not eat raw sprouts such as bean, alfalfa, clover, or radish sprouts. All sprouts should be cooked thoroughly before eating to reduce the risk of illness.

Separate for safety

Keep fruits and vegetables that will be eaten raw separate from other foods such as raw meat, poultry, and seafood, as well as kitchen utensils. In addition, be sure to:

- Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and counter tops with hot water and soap between the preparation of raw meat, poultry and seafood products and the preparation of produce that will not be cooked. Even better, designate separate cutting boards and utensils for meat and produce.
- For added protection, kitchen sanitizers can be used on cutting boards and counter tops periodically. Try a solution of one teaspoon of chlorine bleach to one quart of water.
- If you use plastic or other non-porous cutting boards, run them through the dishwasher after use.

Fruit and vegetable juices

Most of the juices sold in the grocery store are pasteurized to kill harmful germs. When fruits and vegetables are fresh-squeezed and left untreated, germs from the inside or outside of the produce may become a part of the finished juice product. Some health food stores, cider mills, and farmers markets sell containers of juice that have not been pasteurized, therefore possibly containing germs that could cause illness. To prevent illness, individuals should drink only juices that have been pasteurized or otherwise treated to kill harmful germs.