

## Fruits and Vegetables: Food Safety

Eating fruits and vegetables has many health advantages. For the most part, people assume that there are few food safety issues when dealing with fruits and vegetables. However, recent history tells us differently. Though relatively rare, there have been cases when fresh melons, prewashed spinach, raspberries, herb mixes, and green onions have been contaminated with germs (bacteria, viruses, or parasites) usually found only in the intestinal tracks of animals. These events can damage the reputation of food providers. The green onion incident caused the Chi-Chi restaurant chain, which was already in financial distress, to declare bankruptcy. These types of cases can also make people moderately to very sick. In extreme cases, people die from the infection caused by contaminated foods, including contaminated fruits and vegetables.

### How do fruits and vegetables become infected?

While it is often difficult to determine how produce becomes infected with germs that are normally found in animals, it is important to find the source of the germs so that it can be stopped from happening again. There are many ways produce can become infected. It is important to remember that fruits and vegetables are grown in soil around farm animals, wild animals, birds, and fowl. Animals may deposit feces in pond water that irrigates the crop, or in the field itself. Water used to wash the produce might not be safe to consume. Improper sanitation procedures used in the field may also lead to contamination.

### What can a consumer do to prevent becoming a victim?

There are a few things that you can do to prevent becoming a victim.

- Wash your hands frequently when handling foods.
- Rinse produce with cool running water, even if it has been “prewashed.” Scrub produce with hands or brush if skins are thick. Rinsing and/or scrubbing produce is important even if you plan on peeling the item. As you slice into the food, the knife will carry germs from the skin surface into the flesh of the fruit or vegetable. To promote longest storage time, it is best to rinse the food shortly before eating it.
- Do not use dishwashing or hand soap to wash produce. These items have not been tested for use on foods.
- Keep produce away from uncooked meat, poultry, and fish.

### Are you better off eating organic fruit and vegetables?

- Organic fruit and vegetables are just as likely to be infected with germs as standard produce. In addition, American consumers are concerned about the safety of fresh fruits and vegetables grown with pesticides. Proper handling, including washing and peeling, can reduce the amount of pesticides on produce. Some consumers are turning to “organically” grown produce as an alternative, thinking it to be safer. However, organic produce is just as likely to be contaminated with bacteria or other microorganisms as conventionally grown produce. Organic produce also needs to be handled with care to reduce the risk of food-borne illness from these germs.

## **Washing Produce**

Before eating or preparing, wash fresh produce under cold running tap water to remove any lingering dirt. This reduces bacteria that may be present. If there is a firm surface, such as on apples or potatoes, the surface can be scrubbed with a brush. Consumers should not wash fruits and vegetables with detergent or soap. These products are not approved or labeled by the Food and Drug Administration for use on foods. You could ingest residues from soap or detergent absorbed on the produce. There are some products on the market that claim to further clean vegetables; however, research has not shown this to be true. Washing under cold running water may be best until more is known.

When preparing fruits and vegetables, cut away any damaged or bruised areas because bacteria that cause illness can thrive in those places. Immediately refrigerate any fresh-cut items such as salad or fruit for best quality and food safety.

Reference: Safe Handling of Raw Produce and Fresh-Squeezed Fruit and Vegetable Juices (November 2005). Retrieved October 2006, from United States Department of Health and Human Services, Food and Drug Administration, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

[www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/prodsafe.html](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/prodsafe.html)

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