

Practical Tips for the Use and Care of Reusable Grocery Shopping Bags

Consumers, governmental agencies, and the retail industry have increasingly been promoting the environmental and economic benefits of reusable shopping bags. There is no disputing these benefits but, in the case of reusable grocery bags, there are also food safety concerns to consider. Certain foods, such as raw produce, meat, poultry, and fish may contain bacteria that can cause foodborne illness. Reusable bags can pick up and accumulate the bacteria from these foods, which can then cross-contaminate other foods and non-food items if appropriate measures are not taken. The following reusable grocery bag tips are intended to provide consumers with some practical food safety tips to lower the risk for cross contamination:

At home:

- Reusable grocery bags should be machine or hand-washed frequently! Dry the bags in a clothes dryer or allow them to air dry.
- After putting groceries away, clean the areas where the bags were placed while un-bagging your groceries, especially the kitchen counter and the kitchen table where food items may later be prepared or served.
- If food residues from any food products have leaked into the bag, make sure to wash and dry the bag thoroughly before reuse.
- If reusable grocery bags have been used to transport non-food items, such as detergents, household cleaners, and other chemicals, wash and dry the bags before using them to transport food items. Alternatively, you may wish to use bags of one color for food items and bags of a different color for non-food items.
- Store grocery bags away from sources of contamination, such as pets, children, and chemicals. Storing reusable grocery bags in the trunk of cars is not recommended. During the warmer months, the increased temperatures can promote the growth of bacteria that may be present on the bags.

At the store:

- Place reusable bags on the bottom shelf of the grocery cart (below the cart basket where food products are placed).
- When selecting packages of meat, poultry, or fish, consider putting the packages in clear plastic bags (often available in the meat and produce sections) to prevent leaking juices from contaminating other food items and the reusable grocery bags.

- Fresh produce should be placed in clear plastic bags to help protect the items from contamination.
- At checkout, do not place reusable grocery bags on the conveyor belt. Hand the bags to the checker/bagger or, if self-bagging, carry the bags to the bagging area at the end of the checkout counter.
- Meat, poultry, and fish should be placed in separate reusable bags from fresh produce and ready-to-eat foods.
- Non-food items should be placed in separate reusable bags from food products.

Following these simple food safety tips will ensure that the reusable grocery bags can be used repeatedly by consumers without increasing the risk of foodborne illness.