



Reducing the Risk of Foodborne Illness Associated with Produce A Guide for Consumers

1. Question: Eating certain fresh fruits and vegetables has been mentioned as leading to foodborne illnesses. Is it safe to eat fresh fruits and vegetables?

Answer: Fresh fruits and vegetables are safe, healthful, nutritious, and tasty. Many recognized authorities recommend eating five or more servings a day. However, these foods, like everything we eat, must be handled correctly to avoid contamination with substances that can cause illness or injury.

2. Question: What can consumers do to protect themselves from foodborne illness when it comes to fresh fruits and vegetables?

Answer: There are a number of basic steps that will add to the safety of fresh produce.

- a) Buy from reputable sources. Produce can be purchased in a number of ways including directly from the producer at roadside stands or certified farmers' markets, from grocers and produce markets, or at restaurants and other retail food facilities. Ask questions of your supplier regarding what food safety standards/guidelines they expect of their suppliers/growers. Don't buy produce from persons who cannot provide a physical business address in case follow-up is needed.
- b) Choose only fruits and vegetables that appear fresh and wholesome without bruises or cuts that may expose edible portions to contamination. Do not buy produce that has visible mold, discoloration, or off odors. Avoid produce with excessive dirt or soil on the edible portions.
- c) Store produce in a cool, dry place. Discard any ice that may be present at the time of purchase and replace with clean ice if necessary. Follow any label directions for storage that may be provided. Do not store raw, unwashed produce near unpackaged ready-to-eat food. Segregate raw meats and poultry from fruits and vegetables by storing raw meats and poultry on separate shelves in the refrigerator. Never store raw meat or poultry above produce.
- d) Wash your hands in warm, soapy water before preparing any food and any time they become soiled. It is especially important to wash your hands after using the bathroom, after changing diapers, after handling raw meat or poultry, after touching pets or animals, and after taking out the garbage.
- e) Wash all produce that is not labeled ready-to-eat or pre-washed. Washing should be performed in a clean and sanitary sink or colander under cool running water. Remove the outer leaves of leafy vegetables like heads of lettuce. Use a clean and sanitary produce brush on the surface of fruits that are peeled, like melons, apples, pears, and oranges. Allow to dry on clean paper towels.
- f) Wash all cutting boards and utensils in warm, soapy water before and after peeling, cutting, or slicing fruits and vegetables. Above all, do not prepare produce intended to be eaten raw on a surface that has been used for raw meat or poultry without thoroughly cleaning it first.

3. Question: What is meant by “ready-to-eat”?

Answer: “Ready-to-eat” produce is sold for immediate consumption without further peeling, trimming, washing, or cooking by the consumer. These preparation steps are performed by the processor to add convenience and quality. Some examples of fresh produce that may be ready-to-eat are pre-cut lettuce, spinach, cut fruits like melon, pineapple, fruit salad, and peeled carrots, broccoli florets, and cauliflower pieces.

4. Question: How do I know if produce is ready-to-eat?

Answer: All produce served in restaurants, such as in tossed salads or on a salad bar, is ready-to-eat. Other produce, such as pre-packaged lettuce/salad may also be ready-to-eat. There are four conditions necessary for produce sold at food facilities other than restaurants to be considered “ready-to-eat.”

- a) The produce is pre-washed to remove soil and other contaminants.
- b) The produce is in a form that can be consumed without further peeling or trimming.
- c) The produce is in a package that serves to protect the food from contamination during transportation and storage.
- d) The package label declares the product to be “ready-to-eat” or prewashed. Produce that is pre-cut and sold from open self-service bins or trays at grocery stores is **NOT** ready-to-eat even though it is in a form that could be consumed “as is.”

5. Question: Do I need to wash ready-to-eat produce?

Answer: These items are intended to be eaten without additional washing by the consumer. Ready-to-eat produce manufacturers take additional steps to ensure a product that is free of contamination at the time of sale. Additional attempts to re-wash it in the home may expose it to contaminants present on cutting boards, utensils, or hands. If you intend to wash ready-to-eat products yourself, be sure to carefully follow the procedure listed in number 2e above.

For more information or to comment these questions and answers please call the California Department of Public Health, Food and Drug Branch at (916) 650-6500, or contact us at www.cdph.ca.gov.