



IT'S YOUR HEALTH



Safe Handling of Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

The Issue

Fruits and vegetables are an important part of a healthy diet, and Canadians are encouraged to eat multiple servings of these foods every day. When eating fresh fruits and vegetables, you should be aware that improper storage, handling, and preparation of these foods can result in food-borne illness.

Background

Fruits and vegetables make up the largest arc of Canada's Food Guide rainbow. A healthy diet rich in a variety of fruits and vegetables may help reduce the risk of some types of cancer. Eating lots of fruits and vegetables regularly may also lower your risk for heart disease and can contribute to your overall health and vitality. According to Canada's Food Guide, having at least one vegetable or fruit at every meal and as a snack will help you get the amount of fruits and vegetables you need each day.

Fresh fruits and vegetables do not naturally contain microorganisms (e.g., bacteria, viruses and parasites) that can cause food-borne illness. However, fresh produce can become contaminated in the field through contact with soil,

contaminated water, wild or domestic animals, or improperly composted manure. Fresh produce can also come into contact with harmful microorganisms during and after harvest if it is not properly handled, stored, and transported. In addition, fresh fruits and vegetables can become contaminated through contact with raw food items such as meat, poultry, seafood, and their juices. This can happen at the grocery store, in the shopping cart, in the refrigerator, or on counters and cutting boards in the kitchen.

Eating contaminated fresh fruits and vegetables can lead to food-borne illness. In Canada, there have been outbreaks of food-borne illness tied to eating cantaloupes, tomatoes, leafy greens (i.e., iceberg lettuce, spinach, and pre-cut ready-to-eat salad) and fresh herbs, such as basil. For details, see the link to Food Recalls and Allergy Alerts (Canadian Food Inspection Agency Web site) in the Need More Info? section below. Keep in mind that the fresh fruits and vegetables available in Canada (including those named above) are generally very safe to eat, as long as they have been stored, handled, and prepared properly.

The Health Effects of Food-borne Illness

The most common symptoms of food-borne illness include stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headache, and fever. These symptoms can start several hours or even days after you eat contaminated food.

Most people recover completely from food-borne illness, but on rare occasions, some may suffer more serious effects. The groups at higher risk for serious health effects include pregnant women, children under the age of 5, adults over the age of 65, and people with weakened immune systems.

Minimizing Your Risk

You can reduce your risk of food-borne illness by following these safety tips when buying, storing, handling, and preparing fresh fruits and vegetables:

Buying Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

- Examine the produce carefully and avoid buying items that are bruised or damaged.
- If buying pre-cut or ready-to-eat fruits and vegetables (e.g., cut melons, cut tomatoes, pre-washed salad), be sure they have been properly refrigerated (i.e., at 4°C or below). This means they should be displayed in a refrigerated container and should not just be sitting on top of ice.
- In your grocery cart or hamper, keep fresh fruits and vegetables separated from other raw foods, such as meat, poultry, seafood and their juices. Make sure fruits and vegetables are also kept separate from these other raw foods when they are packed to take home.

Storing Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

- When you get home, promptly refrigerate the fresh fruits and vegetables that need refrigeration. This includes all pre-cut and ready-to-eat produce. Ask your grocer if you are not certain whether specific items need to be refrigerated.
- When you refrigerate fruits and vegetables, keep them separate from meat, poultry, seafood, and their juices to avoid cross-contamination.
- Keep your refrigerator at the proper temperature (4°C or below). Use a fridge thermometer to check.

Handling and Preparing Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

- Always start by washing your hands for at least 20 seconds using hot water and soap.
- Make sure your utensils, cutting boards, and counter-tops have also been cleaned with hot soapy water. When cleaning, avoid using sponges or other materials that are difficult to keep clean and dry, as these can spread bacteria around.
- Before eating or preparing fresh fruits and vegetables:
- Cut away any bruised or damaged areas, since harmful bacteria can thrive in these areas. Be sure to clean your knife with hot water and soap before using it again.
- Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly under fresh, cool, running water, even if you plan to peel them. This helps prevent the spread of any bacteria that may be present. (This is a general safety tip that may not always apply.

For example, you do not need to wash a banana before peeling it.

- Use a clean produce brush to scrub items that have firm surfaces (e.g., oranges, melons, potatoes, carrots, etc.). It is not necessary to use produce cleansers to wash fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Ready-to-eat, bagged, pre-washed leafy greens do not need to be washed again before eating. However, pre-cut or pre-washed leafy greens sold in open bags or containers should be washed before eating.
- Place peeled or cut fruits and vegetables on/into a separate clean plate or container to prevent them from becoming cross-contaminated.
- Refrigerate fresh fruits and vegetables within two hours of peeling or cutting them. Discard any cut fruits and vegetables that have been left at room temperature for more than two hours.

It is also important to pay attention to food recalls and remove affected food items from your home.

The Government of Canada's Role

The Government of Canada works with industry to help identify best practices that can be used to help prevent contamination of fresh produce throughout the food system, from the field to the store. In addition, Health Canada sets policies and standards governing the safety and nutritional quality of all food sold in Canada. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) enforces the policies and ensures that necessary warnings are released quickly to the Canadian public.



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Your health and safety... our priority.

Votre santé et votre sécurité... notre priorité.

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Updated

January 2009

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As a founding member of the Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety Education, Health Canada also participates in public awareness campaigns about safe food practices. An example is the Be Food Safe Canada campaign, which encourages consumers to follow four basic food safety steps (Clean, Separate, Cook, Chill) to help prevent food-borne illnesses.

Need More Info?

See the following:
Health Canada's Web section on Food-Related Illnesses, at:
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/securit/ill-intox/index_e.html

Fresh Produce Factsheets (Factsheets on tomatoes, melons, mushrooms, leafy greens, and fresh herbs) at:
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/securit/handl-manipul/safety-salubriteindex-eng.php

Be Food Safe Canada, at:
www.befoodsafe.ca

The Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety Education, at:
www.canfightbac.org/en/

Also, see the following on the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's Web site:
Food Safety Facts for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables, at:
www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/concen/specif/fruvege.shtml

Common Causes of Foodborne Illness, at:
<http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/concen/causee.shtml>

Food Recalls and Allergy Alerts, at:
www.inspection.gc.ca/english/corpaffr/reclarapp/recaltoce.shtml

For more information or a copy of Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide, visit:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index_e.html
or call 1-800-O-Canada (1-800-622- 6232).

The call is toll-free in Canada.

For articles on such topics as Listeria and Food Safety, Risks associated with Sprouts, Salmonella, and Unpasteurized Fruit Juices and Cider, visit the It's Your Health Web section on Food and Nutrition, at:
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/iyh-vsv/food-aliment/index2_e.html

For additional articles on health and safety issues go to the It's Your Health Web section at:
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh
You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709 or TTY at 1-800-267-1245*.

Original: March 2009

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Catalogue # H13-7/53-2009E-PDF
ISBN # 978-1-100-11750-8

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