



## Reducing Risk of Getting a Foodborne Illness from Fresh Produce

Aurora A. Saulo

Extension Specialist in Food Technology, Department of Tropical Plant and Soil Sciences

There have been several outbreaks in recent months involving fresh produce. One of the outbreaks was due to contamination of fresh spinach with *E. coli* O157:H7, a second concerned salmonella in tomatoes, and a third involved *E. coli* O157:H7 in fresh shredded lettuce.

Because of these recent outbreaks, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is reminding consumers to observe food safety precautions when buying and preparing fresh produce. Consumers are strongly encouraged to adopt the following practices.

### Buying

Select products that are not damaged or bruised; bacteria tend to accumulate more on damaged surfaces.

Consider fresh produce that has been cut (e.g., half a cantaloupe, or bagged salad greens) to be potentially hazardous; buy only cut produce that is under refrigeration or surrounded by ice.

Bag fresh produce individually and put it in a part of your grocery cart separate from fresh meats and seafood.

### Transporting

Refrigerate fresh produce as soon as possible after buying it. Avoid leaving it unrefrigerated for an extended period of time—2 hours or more unrefrigerated should be cause for concern. For example, do not leave it in the car while running errands on the way home. If necessary, keep it temporarily in a cooler, but not the same cooler used to transport fresh meats and seafood.

### Storing

Store fresh produce at 40°F or below. Fresh fruits and vegetables such as lettuce, mushrooms, herbs, and strawberries are best kept refrigerated. Pre-cut or peeled produce must be refrigerated continually. Store fresh produce separately from foods such as raw meats, poultry, and seafood.

### Preparing

Wash your hands thoroughly for 20 seconds with soap and water before handling fresh produce.

Check unopened packages of pre-cut bagged produce, such as salad greens, for usage instructions. If the package states that the fresh produce it contains is pre-washed, it can be used without further washing. As an added measure of caution, pre-washed produce can be washed again, but do this just before serving.

All unpackaged fresh produce, as well as packaged produce that has not been pre-washed, must be thoroughly washed under potable running water (do not use detergent or soap) just before peeling, cutting, eating, or cooking.

Scrub firm produce, such as melons and cucumbers, with a clean produce brush.

Surface-dry cleaned produce with a clean cloth towel or paper towels.

### Other food safety tips

Thoroughly wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and counter-tops that are in contact with food both before and after use. As an added precautionary measure, use one teaspoon of chlorine bleach in one quart of water to sanitize surfaces that foods contact.

If possible, use dedicated cutting boards: one for fresh produce and another for raw meats, poultry, or seafood. Cutting boards made of plastic or other non-porous materials may be washed in the dishwasher.

After handling fresh produce, thoroughly wash your hands again.

### Resource

<http://www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/NEWS/2006/NEW01503.html> (accessed December 17, 2006)