



Food Safety & Nutrition

Washing Fresh Produce



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Washing fresh produce before eating is a healthful habit. Supermarkets, as a rule, don't wash produce before putting it out, but many stores mist it while its on display. Misting keeps the produce from drying. Small amounts of surface residues do drain off, but may not be enough. You can reduce and often eliminate residues on fresh fruits and vegetables by following these simple tips:

- Wash produce with large amounts of cold or warm tap water, and scrub with a brush when appropriate. Do not use soap or chlorine bleach water solutions.
- Throw away the outer leaves of leafy vegetables such as lettuce and cabbage. Separate lettuce leaves and wash them individually.
- Fresh herbs and sprouts should also be rinsed before serving. Since sprouts have caused numerous foodborne illness outbreaks, people in high-risk groups (children, elderly and people with weakened immune systems) are advised not to eat sprouts.
- Wash vegetables using a vegetable brush on carrots and other produce you plan to eat the skins of. This step removes most lingering dirt and reduces bacteria that may be present.
- Purchase produce that is not bruised or damaged.
- When you buy cut melons, be sure they have been buried in ice or displayed in a refrigerated case, not just displayed on top of ice. Uncut melon does not need to be refrigerated.
- Before cutting melons, be sure the outer surface is washed with drinking water and dried with a paper towel. Otherwise, when you slice through them any bacteria on the outer surface can be transferred to the inner flesh.
- Cut melons must be refrigerated at 45 degrees F or below.
- Cut melons may be served without refrigeration for a maximum of 4 hours but leftovers should be thrown away. If you want to save leftovers, then refrigerate after 2 hours.
- Fruits with high acid content (apples, oranges, pineapples, and lemons) can stay at room temperature longer. The high acid content protects them from being potentially dangerous.

One final note – Do not use detergent or soap to wash produce. Because produce skins and peelings are porous, fruits and vegetables can absorb detergent residues, which are not deemed safe for consumption. If you choose to use a commercial vegetable wash product follow the manufacturers' instructions. The products will clean the produce, but no research to date has indicated that it does any better job in removing bacteria than water. Lastly dry them with a paper towel that can be tossed away.

For more information or to ask some food safety questions contact the WSU Extension office at 360-397-6060.