

Eating Fruits and Vegetables Safely



The United States has the safest food supply in the world. Yet each year 76 million cases of food borne illness are reported each year in the US with many more that go unreported. When most individuals think about food poisoning they often associate outbreaks with animal foods such as eggs, meat, poultry and milk. These foods fit the profile of a potentially hazardous food which is they are generally moist, high in protein and have a neutral to slightly acidic pH. Lately there has been an increase in the number of food borne illnesses linked to produce.

Fruits and vegetables become carriers of disease since many grow close to the ground where bacteria can reside. Melons, lettuce, onions, and berries are just a few examples of produce implicated in food borne outbreaks. Other produce such as apples, pears and potatoes become contaminated from handler's hand such as the farm worker or the worker preparing the produce. Produce that is served ready to eat or raw where no cooking is involved is of particular concern. Here are some tips to minimize your chances of contracting a food borne illness from produce:

1. Eat fresh fruits in season. Imported fruits and vegetables may not adhere to the stricter standards that the US growers abide by.
2. Purchase produce that is blemish and bruise free to minimize the harboring of harmful microorganisms.
3. Cook vegetables rather than eating raw if you have a comprised immune system such as young children, pregnant, elderly or those with chronic or acute illnesses.
4. Choose to drink only juice and cider that has been pasteurized.
5. Avoid buying precut or presliced produce. By exposing the flesh of the fruit or vegetables you increase the chance of contamination.
6. Clean all your equipment with hot soapy water, rinse and sanitize with a bleach water solution. Then air-dry the equipment.
7. Refrigerate all produce that may deteriorate prior to use.
8. Wash all produce with running potable water just prior to preparing. Use friction such as a clean scrub brush whenever possible. Pull apart lettuce leaves, and other produce that has crevices where harmful microorganisms can harbor. Discard outer leaves of leafy greens like lettuce and spinach.
9. Wash your hands frequently with warm soapy water, rinse and dry with a disposable paper towel. Never dry your hands on a kitchen or other common household towel when preparing food.
10. Even if the package of vegetables says triple washed, rinse the vegetables again under cold water.
11. Refrigerate cut produce promptly and place above raw meats.

Remember the benefits of eating fruits and vegetables outweigh any risk for food borne illness. As with all foods, precautions should be taken to minimize your family's risk of food borne illness.