

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Keep fresh produce healthy and safe

I'm hearing more about antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Should I start cleaning fresh produce with a commercial fruit and vegetable wash?

Antibiotic-resistant microbes, including bacteria, viruses and other bugs, are indeed a serious public health issue in the areas of both food safety and healthcare. But if you carefully follow standard guidelines to reduce the risk of foodborne illness from fresh produce, food safety experts say any added benefit you might get from commercial washes available today would be minimal at best.

You may be hearing more about antibiotic resistance because of a series of outbreaks that recently made news. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a strain of *Shigella* bacteria that is resistant to ciprofloxacin, or Cipro, a commonly used antibiotic, sickened 243 people in 32 states and Puerto Rico between May 2014 and February 2015. Most cases were traced to people who had recently traveled internationally. Shigellosis is transmitted person to person through (excuse the term) the fecal-oral route, often because people don't wash their hands thoroughly after using the bathroom or changing a diaper.

Shigella can be spread through food if it is on an infected person's hands when preparing or serving food, or in some cases if the food was grown or washed in contaminated water. It can also be spread through contaminated recreational water.

Foodborne illnesses that are most commonly associated with fresh produce include sickness caused by *Salmonella*, *E. coli* and *Listeria monocytogenes*. Such bacteria, as well as viruses and other types of bad bugs that can make people ill, can sometimes be resistant to antibiotics. Food isn't grown or raised in sterile conditions, and so it's always wise to take precautions when handling



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food. Recommendations include:

- Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water before and after food preparation.
- Rinse produce thoroughly under running water before eating, cutting or cooking it, whether it's grown at home or purchased from a grocery store or farmers market, and whether it's grown conventionally or organically.
- Promptly refrigerate prepackaged lettuce and other produce labeled "ready to eat." Although the washing during processing removes soil particles and does a good job minimizing the risk of foodborne pathogens, it doesn't hurt to give it an extra rinse just before eating it.
- Carefully handle produce with a rind, such as cantaloupe and watermelon. It should be scrubbed with a clean produce brush under running water before being cut into. If you laid it on a cutting board or other surface before washing it, clean and sanitize the surface before cutting into the fruit to reduce the risk of cross-contamination.

For more ideas and some instructional videos, see The Ohio State University's Food Safety website, foodsafety.osu.edu. Recommendations for consumers are under "Dine In."

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Editor: This column was reviewed by Sanja Ilic, Ohio State University Extension's state specialist in Food Safety.

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