

Chow Line

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

Be aware of risks of growing, eating sprouts

My teenage son has taken a keen interest in healthy eating, and as part of this, he has started growing his own sprouts. I remember there was an issue with raw sprouts a few years ago. Are they safe to grow and eat?

It's great that your son is interested in eating more healthfully, and if you do any home gardening, you know how inspiring it is to grow and enjoy your own food.

But raw sprouts do have some inherent issues related to food safety. In the last 20 years, there have been at least 30 outbreaks of foodborne illness associated with different types of raw and lightly cooked sprouts. A 2011 outbreak from fenugreek sprouts in Germany made thousands of people ill and was linked to 50 deaths.

Most sprout-related outbreaks are caused by Salmonella and toxin-producing E. coli, and often the bacteria is traced back to the seed.

And therein lies the problem: The warm, moist conditions seeds need to sprout into, well, sprouts, whether at home or in a commercial facility, are also exactly the type of conditions bacteria need to multiply rapidly. And since any bacteria on the seed is incorporated into the sprout, you can't even partially remove it like when you rinse other types of produce under running water.

The opportunity for problems to arise is great enough that public health authorities urge anyone who is at greatest risk of foodborne illness, including children younger than 5, the elderly, pregnant women or anyone with a chronic health condition such as diabetes or cancer, to refrain from eating raw sprouts all together.

If your son is otherwise healthy, the sprouts he grows may not pose a serious health risk. But it



photo: iStock

might be wise to be on the lookout for signs of foodborne illness, which can strike anywhere from few hours up to eight days after ingesting the bacteria. Symptoms include cramps, diarrhea, fever and vomiting.

In addition, encourage your son to reduce the chance of illness as much as possible by following recommended practices. The University of California has a fact sheet, "Growing Seed Sprouts at Home," online at anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/8151.pdf. It includes detailed recommendations for buying, treating and growing sprout seeds to minimize risk. For example, the fact sheet spells out how to soak seeds in a hydrogen peroxide solution, followed by rinsing them and soaking them in clean water. At that point, you can remove any debris or other seed material that floats to the surface — an important step, as, the fact sheet says, most contamination has been tied to that material.

The authors also emphasize the need to carefully sanitize the containers used for sprouting the seed and provide thorough instructions for doing so. However, even with carefully following the steps outlined in the fact sheet, be aware that there is still no way to guarantee the safety of raw sprouts that are contaminated prior to germination.

For more information about food safety, see foodsafety.gov.

Feb. 19, 2016

By Martha Filipic
614-292-9833
filipic.3@osu.edu

Editor: This column was reviewed by Sanja Ilic, food safety specialist with Ohio State University Extension.

Chow Line is a service of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1043, or filipic.3@osu.edu.

College Marketing and Communications
2021 Coffey Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1043
614-292-2011

208 Research Services Building
1680 Madison Ave.
Wooster, OH 44691-4096
330-263-3780

© 2016, The Ohio State University

CFAES provides research and related educational programs to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis. For more information: go.osu.edu/cfaesdiversity.