



Wax off, wax on? Waxed produce OK

Why is there a waxy substance on some of the fruits and vegetables I buy at the grocery store? Is it safe?

Some fruits and vegetables, especially those grown in warm climates, produce a natural waxy coating on the surface to prevent too much moisture from being lost.

When the crops are harvested and thoroughly cleaned before packaging and shipping, this natural wax is removed. If the wax isn't present, produce that needs to travel a long distance may arrive damaged. So, produce handlers apply a thin coating of new wax to replace what was lost.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, applying the wax coating is helpful because it:

- Helps the produce retain moisture and stay fresh.
- Protects the produce from bruising and inhibits mold.
- Prevents other physical damage or disease from harming the produce.
- Enhances the product's appearance.

While the wax can be made from several different materials, they all have to be approved by the FDA as safe to consume. Also, any fresh produce that is waxed must be labeled. The FDA recommends consumers look for labels that say, "Coated with food-grade vegetable-, petroleum-, beeswax-, or shellac-based wax or resin, to maintain freshness."

Although "petroleum" and "shellac" are substances we don't normally

consume, the amount used is very small: A piece of waxed produce has only a drop or two of the microscopic coating. Still, for organic produce, the National Organic Program says wax can be applied only to non-edible portions of produce, except for organic citrus that can be waxed even though rinds could be used in juices and baking.

Wax is most often applied to apples, cucumbers, lemons, limes, oranges, other citrus fruit, bell peppers, eggplant and potatoes, although other types of produce also could be coated.

Since the coating is perfectly edible, there's no need to worry about removing it before eating. Just rinse your produce, as usual, under running water. For cucumbers or other firm produce with a tougher rind, the FDA recommends using a vegetable scrub brush while rinsing under running water. You should do this even for produce that you intend to peel, especially cantaloupe. Doing so reduces the risk that any contaminants on the surface get onto the flesh as you cut through or otherwise handle the produce.

For more information on fresh produce, see the FDA web page at <http://bit.ly/rawproduce>.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University's 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.



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