



## Follow produce safety guidelines

**It seems like fresh produce has become more of a food safety problem than it was when I was growing up. Why? And what can I do to reduce my risk?**

You'd probably find few people who would disagree with you. From 2006, when an *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreak was linked to fresh spinach, to 2012, when a *Listeria monocytogenes* outbreak was linked to cantaloupe, some people have become wary about fresh produce.

The reasons we're seeing more produce-related outbreaks are multiple. It could be that we spot them more often now. Public health authorities have put in place sophisticated surveillance systems that can identify multi-state outbreaks more easily, so illnesses that might have slipped under the radar in the past are now connected and identified as an outbreak.

And, more of the fresh produce we eat today is processed in some way for the sake of convenience. Lettuce, for example, is washed, mixed and sealed in a bag; melon is cubed and packaged in a pint container. That means more handling — and more steps where food could become contaminated.

Earlier this year, the Center for Science in the Public Interest published a review of foodborne illness outbreaks between 2001 and 2010 in which both the contaminated food and the foodborne contaminant were identified. The group found that produce was responsible for

17 percent of the outbreaks and 24 percent of the illnesses. That was more than any other category of food, including seafood, poultry or other meat, and dairy foods.

At the same time, the report noted that when you consider consumption rates, fruits and vegetables are among the safest foods. That is, pound for pound, fresh produce is generally a safe bet compared with other foods that may cause foodborne illnesses.

Still, what can you do to reduce your risk? The Food and Drug Administration offers tips at "Raw Produce: Selecting and Serving It Safely" at <http://bit.ly/safeproduce>. Among the guidelines:

- Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water before and after preparation.
- Rinse produce thoroughly under running water before eating or cooking it. This includes produce with a rind or that you otherwise would cut into or peel. Scrub firm produce, such as melons or squash, with a clean produce brush.
- You don't need to rinse pre-cut, bagged and packaged produce items labeled "ready-to-eat," but some people do anyway. Whether you rinse it or not, always follow safe handling practices.

*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, 43210-1044, or [filipic.3@osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@osu.edu).*



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**Editor:**

This column was reviewed by Sanja Ilic, state food safety specialist for Ohio State University Extension, the outreach arm of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences.

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