

Proper handling of fresh produce can reduce risk of foodborne illness

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Fresh produce is plentiful right now, but it's important to follow some safe-handling tips to help protect yourself and your family, said a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service expert.

"Whether produce comes from a [grocery store](#) or farmers market, it's

important to be consistent in practicing safe food handling at home," said Rebecca Dittmar, AgriLife Extension program specialist in nutrition and food science, Kerrville.

Dittmar said some simple handling practices can greatly reduce the risk of foodborne illness from fresh produce.

"You should thoroughly rinse fresh produce with [fresh water](#) just before you eat or prepare it to be eaten," she said. "Never use soap or bleach to clean fresh fruits or vegetables, and be sure to refrigerate cut, peeled or cooked fresh fruits and vegetables within two hours of preparing them."

When purchasing produce, Dittmar said, be sure to check fresh fruits and vegetables for bruising or other signs of damage. If purchasing pre-cut fruits and vegetables, make sure the product is refrigerated or on ice. Dittmar also said be sure to separate produce from raw meat, seafood, poultry, eggs, dairy and other items while shopping.

"You should also keep fresh produce away from these and other items that may cause [cross contamination](#) while it is in your refrigerator," she noted.

"Before and after you handle your produce, wash your hands with hot soapy [water](#) for at least 20 seconds," she said. "Make sure all surfaces and utensils, such as cutting boards and knives, are washed with hot soapy water and sanitized before and after preparing your produce."

Use running water to rinse only the fruits and vegetables you plan to eat, Dittmar said.

"Fruits and vegetables with a firm skin should be rubbed by hand or scrubbed with a clean brush while rinsing under running water. And dry your rinsed fruits and vegetables with a clean cloth or paper towel."

However, she added, packaged ready-to-eat, washed or triple-washed fruits and vegetables should not be washed.

"In addition to making sure you refrigerate cut [fresh produce](#) as well as all cut, peeled or cooked fresh fruits and vegetables within two hours to prevent pathogens from growing, you should also keep your refrigerator at or below 40 degrees Fahrenheit," she said.

For additional safety, Dittmar suggested tossing out any bruised, damaged or potentially cross-contaminated produce, as well as tossing any fruits or vegetables not refrigerated within two hours of cutting, peeling or cooking.

"If some part of a [fruit](#) or [vegetable](#) is bruised or damaged, remove it when preparing to cook the item or before eating it raw," she said. "And toss any produce that has come in contact with raw meat or similar foods either inside or outside the refrigerator. The best rule of thumb is: When in doubt, throw it out."

More information: For more information, go to foodsafety.tamu.edu

Partnership for Food Safety Education: www.fightbac.org

Provided by Texas A&M University

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