

Sprouts: Safe Handling Practices for Consumers¹

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Sprouts have become regular items in salad bars and produce departments during the past few years. However, they have been linked to a few outbreaks of foodborne illnesses. Although the federal government and sprout producers are working together to ensure safety of the product, consumers must take some steps to protect themselves. Understanding how sprouts are produced and handled before they reach your plate, and making good decisions may help reduce your risk of foodborne illness from sprouts.



Why Are There Problems?

- Sprouts can be grown from many types of seeds: alfalfa, radish, broccoli, mung bean, wheat, and soybean.
- Since seed sprouts are produced as agricultural commodities, they do not have the same cleanliness requirements as processed foods.
- A wide variety of pathogens (organisms that cause illness) have been found in seed sprouts.
- Many species of pathogens can survive on the seeds for months.
- It is very difficult to detect these pathogens when they are present in low numbers.

When Sprouts Are Grown:

- Sprouts are grown in moist and warm conditions.
- These conditions are also ideal for bacteria to multiply.
- Many interventions have been tried to reduce the bacterial growth and contamination in sprouts. However, none of these methods can totally reduce harmful bacteria on sprouts.

When You Shop:

- Sprouts must be in the refrigerated section of the store. This helps to control bacterial growth.
- Examine the package carefully for any sign of spoilage and check the “sell by” date. Do **not** purchase if the date has passed.

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During Preparation:

- Wash hands with hot soapy water before and after:
 - handling fresh produce
 - handling raw meat, poultry, or seafood
 - using the bathroom
 - changing diapers
 - handling pets

- Rinse sprouts with cool tap water just before preparing or eating. **Don't use soap or detergents.**

- Washing reduces bacterial population on the surface, but does not eliminate all the bacteria.

- Pregnant women, persons under age 5 and over 65, and persons with AIDS or using medications that cause depression of immunity should **never** consume raw sprouts. Susceptible individuals can enjoy cooked or blanched sprouts.

- Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and counter tops often. Use hot soapy water and rinse well. **Sanitize** them after contact with fresh produce, or raw meat, poultry, or seafood (see box).

- Sanitize kitchen sink frequently to prevent a build up of microbes.

To sanitize cutting boards, dishes, and utensils:
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Mix one teaspoon chlorine bleach in one quart water.
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Pour the mixture onto all surfaces or submerge appropriate items into the above solution and let sit at least one minute.

Rinse surfaces well with hot running water.

- **Do not** cross contaminate! Use clean cutting boards and utensils for fresh produce.

- If you can, use separate cutting boards for raw meat, poultry, and seafood.

- Do not consume ice that has come in contact with fresh produce or other raw products.

- Use a cooler with ice or ice gel packs when you take perishable foods outdoors. This includes cut fresh fruits and vegetables.

Following these steps will help reduce your risk of foodborne illness from fresh produce.

For More Information:

Visit the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) website at: <http://www.fda.gov> or call FDA Consumer Inquiries at 1-888-SAFEFOOD (a toll-free number).