FOOD FACTS

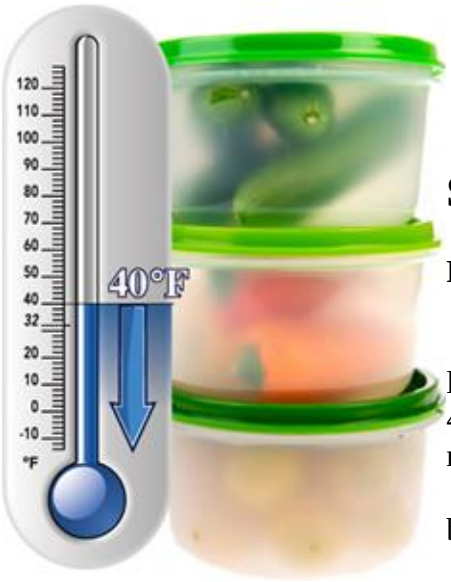
From the U.S. Food and Drug Administration

Fruits and vegetables are an important part of a healthy diet. Your local markets carry an amazing variety of fresh fruits and vegetables that are both nutritious and delicious. However, harmful bacteria that may be in the soil or water where produce grows may come in contact with fruits and vegetables and contaminate them. Fresh produce may also become contaminated after it is harvested, such as during preparation or storage. Eating contaminated produce (or fruit and vegetable juices made from contaminated produce) can lead to foodborne illness, often called "food poisoning." As you enjoy fresh produce and fresh-squeezed fruit and vegetable juices, follow these safe handling tips to help protect yourself and your family.

Buy Right

You can help keep produce safe by making wise buying decisions at the grocery store.

- Purchase produce that is not bruised or damaged.
- When selecting pre-cut produce — such as a half a watermelon or bagged salad greens — choose only those items that are refrigerated or surrounded by ice.
- Bag fresh fruits and vegetables separately from meat, poultry and seafood products when packing them to take home from the market.



Keep your refrigerator set at 40° F or below. Use a fridge thermometer to check!

Store Properly

Proper storage of fresh produce can affect both quality and safety.

- Store perishable fresh fruits and vegetables (like strawberries, lettuce, herbs, and mushrooms) in a clean refrigerator at a temperature of 40°F or below. If you're not sure whether an item should be refrigerated to maintain quality, ask your grocer.
- Refrigerate all produce that is purchased pre-cut or peeled to maintain both quality and safety.

Separate for Safety

Keep fruits and vegetables that will be eaten raw separate from other foods such as raw meat, poultry or seafood — and from kitchen utensils used for those products. Take these steps to avoid cross-contamination:

- Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils and counter tops with soap and hot water between the preparation of raw meat, poultry and seafood products and the preparation of produce that will not be cooked.
- If you use plastic or other non-porous cutting boards, run them through the dishwasher after use.

Prepare Safely

When preparing any fresh produce, begin with clean hands. Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water *before* and *after* preparation.

- Cut away any damaged or bruised areas on fresh fruits and vegetables before preparing and/or eating. Produce that looks rotten should be discarded.
- Wash all produce thoroughly under running water before eating, cutting or cooking. This includes produce grown conventionally or organically at home, or purchased from a grocery store or farmer's market. Washing fruits and vegetables with soap or detergent or using commercial produce washes is not recommended.
- Even if you plan to peel the produce before eating, it is still important to wash it first so dirt and bacteria aren't transferred from the knife onto the fruit or vegetable. FDA has a poster, Wash Fruits and Vegetables (PDF: 1.6MB), you can print and display to remember to wash your fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Scrub firm produce, such as melons and cucumbers, with a clean produce brush.
- Dry produce with a clean cloth towel or paper towel to further reduce bacteria that may be present.

What About Pre-Washed Produce?

Many pre-cut, bagged, or packaged produce items like lettuce are pre-washed and ready-to-eat. If so, it will be stated on the packaging. If the package indicates that the contents are pre-washed and ready-to-eat, you can use the produce without further washing.

If you do chose to wash a product marked "pre-washed" or "ready-to-eat," be sure to use safe handling practices to avoid any cross contamination.

Sprouts: What You Should Know

Like any fresh produce that is consumed raw or lightly cooked, sprouts that are served on salads, wraps, sandwiches, and Asian food may contain bacteria that can cause foodborne illness. Unlike other fresh produce, seeds and beans need warm and humid conditions to sprout and grow, and these conditions are also ideal for the growth of bacteria, including *Salmonella*, *Listeria*, and *E. coli*.

Rinsing sprouts first will not remove bacteria. Home-grown sprouts also present a health risk if they are eaten raw or lightly cooked.

What can consumers do to reduce the risk of illness?

- Children, the elderly, pregnant women, and persons with weakened immune systems should avoid eating raw or lightly cooked sprouts of any kind (including onion, alfalfa, clover, radish, and mung bean sprouts).
- Cook sprouts thoroughly to reduce the risk of illness. Cooking kills the harmful bacteria.
- When you’re eating out, ask that raw sprouts not be added to your food. If you buy a ready-made sandwich, salad, or Asian food, check to make sure raw sprouts have not been added

Questions and Answers about Fresh Produce

What is "organic produce"?

Organic produce is grown without using most conventional pesticides; fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge; bioengineering; or ionizing radiation.

Before a product can be labeled "organic," a government-approved certifier inspects the farm where the food is grown to make sure the farmer meets the U.S. Department of Agriculture's organic standards. Companies that handle or process organic food before it reaches the supermarket or restaurant must be certified, too.

What is ethylene gas - and how does it affect produce?

Some fruits and vegetables - like bananas - naturally produce ethylene gas when they ripen. Oftentimes, such fruits and vegetables are harvested in the unripened state to preserve firmness and for long shelf life; they are later exposed to ethylene gas to induce ripening.

What does the "use-by" date mean on a package of fresh produce?

"Best-If-Used-By- (or Before)" date is the last date recommended for peak quality as determined by the manufacturer of the product.

Why are wax coatings used on fruits and vegetables?

Many vegetables and fruits make their own natural waxy coating. After harvest, fresh produce may be washed to clean off dirt and soil - but such washing also removes the natural wax. Therefore, waxes are applied to some produce to replace the natural waxes that are lost.

Wax coatings help retain moisture to maintain quality from farm to table including:

- when produce is shipped from farm to market
- while it is in the stores and restaurants
- once it is in the home

Waxes also help inhibit mold growth, protect produce from bruising, prevent other physical damage and disease, and enhance appearance.

How are waxes applied?

Waxes are used only in tiny amounts to provide a microscopic coating surrounding the entire product. Each piece of waxed produce has only a drop or two of wax.

Coatings used on fruits and vegetables must meet FDA food additive regulations for safety. Produce shippers and supermarkets in the United States are required by federal law to label fresh fruits and vegetables that have been waxed so you will know whether the produce you buy is coated. Watch for signs that say: "Coated with food-grade vegetable-, petroleum-, beeswax-, or shellac- based wax or resin, to maintain freshness."

Source:
http://www.fda.gov/food/resourcesforyou/consumers/ucm114299.htm