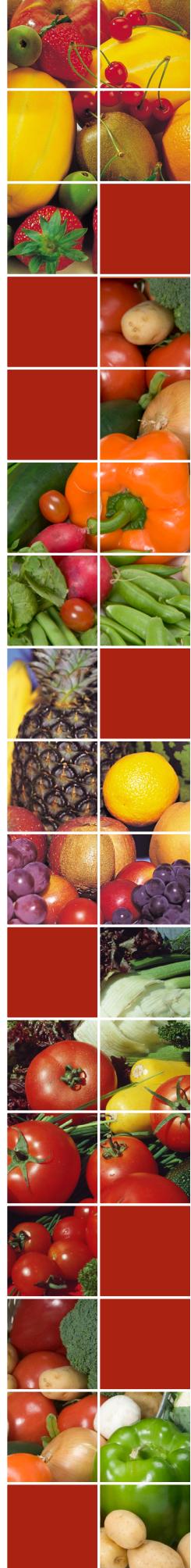


Safe Handling of Fresh Tomatoes

Amanda Scott*

Tomatoes are a good source of vitamin C. Like all fresh fruits and vegetables, tomatoes are an important part of a healthy diet — they provide vitamins, minerals and fiber to help keep your body healthy.

Occasionally, fresh fruits and vegetables can become contaminated with harmful bacteria or viruses known as pathogens. Examples of pathogens include *Salmonella*, *E. coli* 0157:H7 and Hepatitis A. This contamination can occur at any point from the field to the table.

If you eat a contaminated fruit or vegetable, it could cause foodborne illness. Common signs of foodborne illness include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headaches and fever. These signs usually appear within 12 to 72 hours and can be serious.

However, handling fresh tomatoes safely will help protect you and your family from foodborne illness.

Shopping

Shop often for fresh tomatoes and buy only what you will use within a few days.

When shopping, choose tomatoes that have:

- ◆ Shiny, smooth skin
- ◆ Firm flesh
- ◆ A healthy, red color and a fresh aroma around the stem end

Avoid tomatoes that:

- ◆ Are very soft
- ◆ Are poorly colored

- ◆ Have cuts, mold, cracks or sunken areas

Damaged tomatoes will spoil quickly and could carry pathogens that cause food-borne illness.

In the shopping cart and in the grocery bags, keep the tomatoes separate from household chemicals and from raw beef, poultry, fish and seafood. Place raw meats in plastic bags to keep the blood and juice from contaminating the tomatoes.

Storing whole tomatoes

Always store whole tomatoes unwashed. Be sure to keep the storage areas clean and dry. When storing or ripening tomatoes at room temperature, keep them separate from household chemicals.

In the refrigerator, keep tomatoes separate from raw beef, poultry, fish and seafood. Store raw meats on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator in a tray or pan. This will prevent juice or blood from dripping onto the tomatoes. Throw away tomatoes that touch raw meats, blood or juice.

Check tomatoes regularly for signs of spoilage such as mold and slime. If spoiled, tomatoes should be thrown out.

Storing cut tomatoes

Be sure to refrigerate tomatoes within 2 hours of cutting them. Store them in plastic bags; in clean, airtight containers; or tightly covered in plastic wrap.

Keep your refrigerator clean and cold (40 degrees F or below).

Washing and serving

To prevent spoilage and mold growth during storage, it is best to wash tomatoes just before you eat or prepare them.

Before handling fresh tomatoes, wash your hands with hot, soapy water for 20 seconds. Dry them with a paper towel.

Wash and sanitize all food preparation areas and utensils with a solution of 1 teaspoon of chlorine bleach in 1 quart of water.

Then wash all whole tomatoes thoroughly in a clean sink under clean, running water, even if you do not plan to eat the skins. Gently rub each tomato with your hands to help remove dirt and bacteria.

Do not use detergents, soaps or bleach to wash fresh tomatoes. These chemicals may change the flavor and could be poisonous.

When cutting or chopping tomatoes, use separate cutting boards and utensils for raw meats and fresh tomatoes, or wash and sanitize them between foods. This will prevent any pathogens on the raw meat from being transferred to the tomatoes.

Be sure to cut off and throw out the stem end of the tomato. This is the area at the top of the tomato where the stem was attached. Pathogens that can cause foodborne illness may hide in this area.

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