

Safe Handling of Fresh Cantaloupe

— Amanda Scott*

Cantaloupe is a good source of vitamin A and vitamin C and is naturally low in calories. Like other fresh fruits, cantaloupe is an important part of a healthy diet. Fresh produce provides vitamins, minerals and fiber to help keep your body healthy.

Occasionally, fresh fruits and vegetables can become contaminated with harmful bacteria or viruses, which are 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, you could get a foodborne illness. Common signs of foodborne illness include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headache and fever. These signs usually appear within 12 to 72 hours and can be serious.

Safe handling of fresh cantaloupes will help protect you and your family from foodborne illness.

Shopping

Shop often for fresh cantaloupes and buy only what you will use within a few days. When shopping, choose a cantaloupe that:

- ◆ Yields to slight pressure
- ◆ Has yellowish skin
- ◆ Has a fresh aroma at the end where the stem was attached
- ◆ Has a healthy outer rind free of tears or cuts

Damaged cantaloupes spoil quickly and could carry pathogens that cause foodborne illness. Avoid cantaloupes that:

- ◆ Have a damaged or cut outer rind
- ◆ Are mushy, molded, shriveled or leaking juice
- ◆ Are damaged at the end where the stem was attached

In the shopping cart and in the grocery bags, keep cantaloupes 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 cantaloupe.

Storing

Always store whole melons unwashed, and keep all storage areas clean and dry. When storing cantaloupes at room temperature, keep them separate from household chemicals.

In the refrigerator, keep both cut and whole cantaloupe 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 cantaloupe. Throw away cantaloupe that touches raw meats, blood or juice.

Storing cut cantaloupe

To store cut cantaloupe, first cut off and throw out the stem end of the cantaloupe. The stem end is the area at the top of the melon where the stem is attached. Patho-



gens that can cause foodborne illness may hide in this area of a melon.

Next, slice the cantaloupe in half, remove the seeds and cut off the rind. Refrigerate the sliced melon within 2 hours of cutting it. Store it in plastic bags or clean, airtight containers.

Check the stored melons regularly for signs of spoilage, such as mold and slime. Throw out any that are spoiled.

Also, 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 cantaloupes just before you eat or prepare them. Even though you do not eat the rind, it is important to wash the cantaloupe before you cut it.

First, wash your hands with hot, soapy water for 20 seconds. Wash your hands before and after handling food, and after touching raw meat, changing a diaper, using the restroom, handling a pet or touching anything that could contaminate

your hands. Then dry your hands with a paper towel.

Wash and sanitize all food preparation areas and utensils with a solution of 1 teaspoon chlorine bleach in 1 quart of water. This includes your fruit/vegetable brush.

Wash all whole cantaloupes thoroughly in a clean sink under clean, running water. Use a clean and sanitized fruit/vegetable brush to vigorously scrub the outside of the cantaloupe under running water. This will help remove dirt and bacteria.

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

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

Refrigerate leftover cut cantaloupe within 2 hours. If it is left unrefrigerated for longer than 2 hours, throw it away.

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