

Food For Your Soul: Be “Food Safe” with Produce During the Holidays

Vegetable dishes, salads, and fruit are an important part of holiday meals for many families. But meals can take a turn for the worse if food safety isn't a regular ingredient in the preparing or cooking of your sweet potato pies, collard greens, broccoli casseroles or fruit salads.

Foodborne disease infections continue to be a serious health issue in the United States, causing an estimated 76 million people to become sick each year. The most common foodborne diseases associated with produce are *E. coli*, *norovirus* and *Hepatitis A*. Most people become sick by eating contaminated foods or beverages or by coming in contact with someone who has a foodborne illness. Pregnant women, older adults, infants and young children, and those with weakened immune systems are at higher risk for severe infections.

Be “food safe” during the holidays to reduce the risk of illness from fresh produce. There are many steps you can take:

- ✓ **Buy wisely.** Don't buy produce that is bruised or damaged. When buying fresh cut produce, choose only items that are refrigerated or surrounded by ice.
- ✓ **Refrigerate promptly.** Certain perishable fresh fruits and vegetables (e.g., strawberries, lettuce, herbs, and mushrooms) should be stored in a clean refrigerator at a temperature of 40°F or below. If you aren't sure whether an item should be refrigerated, ask your grocer. Produce that is purchased pre-cut or peeled should be refrigerated within two hours.
- ✓ **Prepare produce with clean hands.** Wash hands for 20 seconds with warm water and soap before and after preparing fresh produce.
- ✓ **Wash produce thoroughly.** Rinse fruits and vegetables under running water. Scrub firm produce such as melons and cucumbers with a clean produce brush. All unpackaged fruits and vegetables, as well as those packaged and not marked pre-washed, should be thoroughly rinsed before eating. This includes produce grown convention-



Jupiter Images

ally or organically at home, or produce from a grocery store or farmer's market.

- ✓ **Don't cross contaminate.** Don't give bacteria the opportunity to spread from one food to another. Consider using one cutting board only for foods that will be cooked such as raw meat, and another one for ready-to-eat foods such as raw fruits and vegetables.

Remember, be “food safe” for the health of you and your family. Happy eating!

For more holiday food safety tips, visit the Food and Drug Administration online at www.fda.gov/consumer/updates/foodsafetytips111307.html.

For more food safety information about meat and poultry, call the U.S. Department of Agriculture's toll-free Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-674-6854. Get answers online from the virtual representative, “Ask Karen” at www.askkaren.gov, or visit the Be Food Safe Web site at www.befoodsafe.gov.

For more information on preventing foodborne illness, call Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Consumer Information Line at 1-800-CDC-INFO or visit www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/foodborneinfections_g.htm.