



## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Food Safety and Fresh Produce**

Recent outbreaks of food-related illnesses have increased many people's concerns about the safety of fresh fruits and vegetables—regardless of whether the cause is hepatitis A, *Escherichia coli* (*E.coli*), or some other foodborne microorganism.

The outbreak of hepatitis A in Pennsylvania, which killed three people and sickened more than 600, has raised new concerns about the safety of this supply and distribution system. The source of the outbreak was identified as green onions (scallions) and, as a result, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has warned consumers not to eat uncooked green onions for the time being.

It is useful to remember that pathogenic (disease-causing) microbes present on fruits or vegetables are there because of contamination, which can occur when produce comes in contact with dirty water, equipment, or storage containers; unsanitary human handlers and food preparers; and/or pests. Contamination can occur in the field or at any point in the food supply chain from production to table.

The fresh-produce processing industry uses various tools to decrease microbial contamination on products. Sanitary operating procedures common to the entire food processing industry include pest control, facility sanitation, worker hygiene, and temperature control. Fresh-produce processors often take specific steps to clean fruits and vegetables, including high-pressure washes, scrubbing, trimming, and peeling. Many processors, especially in the fresh-cut produce industry, also use sanitizing washes or dips to clean produce. These dips rely on chlorine or other sanitizers to kill harmful microbes. All the treatments, when properly applied, will substantially decrease—but may not eliminate—microbial contamination.

Consumers can take several actions to decrease their risk from disease-causing microbes on fresh fruits and vegetables. Because most microbial contamination is present on the skin or outer layers of produce, washing and peeling are effective ways to lessen the numbers of harmful microorganisms present.

- Wash produce with clean water before eating. (Household soaps and other cleansers are not recommended; they may not be effective in killing or removing or removing pathogens and may leave harmful residue on the produce that poses a greater risk than any microbes potentially present)
- Scrub firm produce, such as melons and cucumbers, with a produce brush during washing.
- Cut out damaged or bruised areas before eating.
- Control temperature of produce to prevent microbial growth.
- Refrigerate fresh produce that requires cool temperatures (below 45 degrees F).
- Avoid leaving cut melons at room temperature for more than two hours.
- Wash hands and food preparation surfaces often.
- Avoid cross-contaminating ready-to-eat foods with raw meat, poultry, or seafood.

These techniques are highly recommended to enhance the safety of fresh produce, but may not be sufficient to remove all pathogens present. This is especially true for leafy greens and other hard-to-wash produce. The only sure way for consumers to eliminate harmful microorganisms in fresh fruits and vegetables is through cooking. Heating fruits or vegetables to a temperature of 160 degrees F or greater is enough to kill pathogenic microorganisms that may be present. Of course, no one wants a cooked green salad. But people who are particularly susceptible to foodborne illnesses—children, the elderly and those with compromised immune systems—may want to avoid higher-risk fresh, uncooked produce.

*Source: Cast (Council for Agricultural Science and Technology) Commentary, December 2003, Food Safety and Fresh Produce.*