Safe Produce
Handling produce safely at home

When it comes to eating smart, fruits and vegetables are among the healthiest foods you can eat. However, occasionally they can become contaminated with harmful bacteria, even if they are labeled organic or look clean. You can still enjoy them and their healthy benefits by following safe food handling practices.

Buy produce that is not damaged or decaying

• Check fresh fruits and vegetables for bruises, punctures and decay.

• Select pre-cut and packaged fruits and vegetables that have been stored on ice or refrigerated.

Clean hands, utensils and surfaces

• Wash your hands with water and soap for 20 seconds before and after preparing fruits and vegetables.

• Clean knives, cutting boards and surfaces with hot water and soap before and after preparing fruits and vegetables.

Wash produce under running water even if you plan to peel

• Rinse fruits and vegetables just before you plan to eat even if you peel them. Otherwise, bacteria may spread when you cut into the produce.

• Rub with your hands, or scrub firm-skinned fruits and vegetables with a clean vegetable brush, under running water.

• Eat packaged fruits and vegetables labeled “pre-washed” or “triple-washed” without rinsing.

• Pat with a cloth or paper towel to remove excess water.

• Use only clean water. Research shows that produce washes, vinegar solutions and detergents are no more effective than plain water at removing bacteria.
Separate produce from raw meat, poultry, seafood and eggs

- Separate produce from raw meat, poultry, seafood, eggs and household chemicals in your shopping cart and in bags at checkout.
- Keep produce away from raw meat and juices in the refrigerator. Store on a shelf above raw meat in case of leaks.
- Use a separate cutting board and utensils for produce or clean with soap and hot water before and after every use.

Chill peeled, cut and cooked produce

- Refrigerate peeled, cut and cooked fruits and vegetables within 2 hours of preparation.
- Use a refrigerator or appliance thermometer to make sure the temperature stays at 40 F or below.

Keep grocery bags clean

Pack raw meat, poultry and seafood in plastic bags before placing in reusable grocery bags. Place in a separate bag from fresh fruits and vegetables and ready-to-eat foods such as salads.

Wash bags frequently in the washing machine or by hand using soap and water.

Store bags in a clean, dry location.

Throw away produce that is damaged or unsafe to eat

- Remove bruised or damaged portions of fruits and vegetables before eating or cooking.
- Dispose of pre-cut or peeled fruits and vegetables if they have not been refrigerated within 2 hours of preparation.
- Dispose of fruits and vegetables that have come in contact with raw meat, poultry, seafood or eggs.
- If in doubt, throw it out!

Sources:
Partnership for Food Safety Education, fightbac.org
Centers for Disease Control, cdc.gov/foodsafety

Janie Burney, PhD, RD
Professor and UT Extension Nutrition Specialist
Department of Family and Consumer Sciences