

“KEEPING SUMMER’S BOUNTY SAFE TO EAT”

Fresh melons and berries fill the aisles of grocery stores and markets. Roadside produce stands full of home grown fruits and vegetables are seen along the highway. All of these are signs that summer is here and so is a bounty of fresh produce. “Summer’s harvest of fresh fruits and vegetables is an important part of a healthy diet,” said Shelia Lewis, Smith County Extension Agent. “Just remember to handle fresh produce safely to prevent foodborne illness,” she said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that there are 76 million cases of foodborne illnesses each year resulting in 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths.

Although not traditionally associated with foodborne illness, fresh fruits and vegetables have recently been linked to several outbreaks. That’s because fresh produce is often eaten raw. In fact, in recent years the proportion of cases of foodborne illness linked to fresh fruits and vegetables has increased.

To help consumers keep fruits and vegetables safe to eat, the Partnership for Food Safety Education (www.fightbac.org) gives six recommendations for safe handling of fresh produce:

Check: “Food safety for fresh fruits and vegetables begins at the store,” Lewis said. Before purchasing, make sure the produce is not bruised, cut, or damaged. If purchasing items that are pre-cut, such as melons, or packaged, such as salads, buy only the items that have been kept refrigerated.

Clean: Hands should be washed in warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds before and after handling fresh produce. Make sure cutting boards, counter tops, peelers and knives are also clean before using them.

Fresh produce should be rinsed under running tap water before you eat it. That’s also true for fruits and vegetables that have rinds or skins that will not be eaten. “People don’t realize they need to scrub the outside of melons with a vegetable brush or rub them with their hands under running water,” Lewis said. “If bacteria contaminate the outside of a melon for example, when you slice into it you have the potential of bringing that contamination into the fruit.”

Clean firm-skinned produce with a clean vegetable brush or rub it with your hands under running tap water. Do not use detergent or bleach to wash fresh produce. After washing, dry fruits and vegetables with a clean cloth or paper towel.

Vegetable brushes can be purchased at your local variety store for two to four dollars. They are an inexpensive tool that can help you keep your fresh produce safe to eat.

Separate: In the grocery cart, keep fresh fruits and vegetables away from such items as cleaners, detergents, and raw meat, poultry, and fish. At home, that advice also holds true during storage in the refrigerator and during preparation: Keep fresh produce away from raw meat, poultry, and fish. Do not use the same cutting board for produce and meats unless it is cleaned with hot, soapy water before and after food preparation.

Cook: If fresh produce has been in contact with raw meat, poultry, fish, or their juices, throw it

away or cook it thoroughly.

Chill: To prevent bacterial growth, store all cut, peeled, or cooked produce in the refrigerator within two hours.

Throw away: Fresh fruits and vegetables that have not been refrigerated within two hours of cutting, peeling, or cooking should be thrown away. Remove and throw away bruised or damaged portions of fresh produce before cooking or eating it raw. Any fruit or vegetable that will not be cooked and that has been contaminated by raw meat, poultry, fish, or their juices should also be thrown away. “If in doubt about the safety of a fruit or vegetable, throw it out!” Lewis said.

With fresh produce on your mind, don't forget the Tyler Farmer's Market will open on May 13, 2006. The Market is open each Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday beginning at 7:00 a.m. and is located on the East Texas State Fairgrounds, 2112 West Front Street in Tyler.

For more information on safe handling for fresh produce, contact the Smith County Extension office at the information below.

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