

Spinach Salad Speculation

Bag those bagged salads

Yes, it's convenient to buy pre-washed, ready-to-eat vegetables. Yes, we all do it. But you risk getting food poisoning, says one expert.

The recent problem with pre-washed, bagged spinach making people sick from a germ called *E. coli* brings the problem to light. These types of salads are a game of chance, cautions Michigan State University Professor, Thomas Whittam, a microbial expert. "When a contaminated plant gets mixed in with hundreds of other plants and packaged together, and when it takes very few bacteria to get sick, that really increases the risks," he said. The germs live in the intestines of healthy cattle. It can make contact with produce from fertilizer, or in contaminated water on a farm. The germs stick to plants. Washing removes 99.99% of the germs, but a few do not wash off. Best bet: Buy individual bunches or heads of greens to reduce your chance of getting ill.

It's a jungle out there: Food safety specialist comments on food contamination

"Microorganisms are literally everywhere, including on and inside of us and most of the food that we eat. Fortunately, most do not make us ill. . . . Bacteria are found in the soil in which the food is grown, in the water that it is irrigated with, on the hands of those that harvest and handle it, pests that eat or live on it, containers that hold food during transit to processing, almost everywhere through processing," says Sam Beattie, PhD, a food safety extension specialist and assistant professor of food science and human nutrition at Iowa State University.

Professor Beattie says it's almost impossible to ensure that there will not be any nasty disease-causing "bugs" on any raw agricultural product, such as spinach and other packaged greens. Lettuce, for example, cannot be cooked to kill the germs, and chemicals cannot be used to kill them either.

So what is a consumer to do? Dr. Beattie offers the following guidelines:

- Buy from reputable stores that have adequate cooling for prepackaged greens. Cooling keeps fresh produce fresh and bacteria from multiplying.
- Look for code dates on the bag. Buy the freshest you can find.
- Look for obvious signs of deterioration in the product – brown leaves, wilted leaves, overly moist or wet, water accumulation in the bag, swollen bags.
- Once purchased, keep the cut produce cold in your refrigerator. Use immediately.
- Iowa State experts do not recommend chemical sanitizer for use on produce at home

Food processing simply can't eliminate bacteria in fresh foods. "Bacteria are tough to kill," Dr. Beattie said. "During the growing and processing of pre-cut fruits or bagged leafy vegetables, there are several steps that are designed to reduce or eliminate many of the bacteria, but the processing steps must be mild enough to avoid destruction of the produce."

He considers the entire food supply safe, and reports that pre-packaged foods are as safe as most other fresh foods. But it is important to look at how much handling of the fresh food occurs.

Source: *Consumer Health News*