



Do I Really Need to Wash That? A Guide to Handling Fresh Produce at Home

Authored by Grace Stern, Associate Extension Agent, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Virginia Cooperative Extension; Alexis Hamilton, Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, Department of Food Science and Technology, Virginia Tech; Laura K. Strawn, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, Department of Food Science and Technology, Virginia Tech

Introduction

Washing produce is an important step to keeping your family healthy. Since produce is grown in close contact with the ground, bacterial contamination may be introduced from animals, soil, and water. Produce may also be handled as it moves through the supply chain to the consumer. Washing produce can remove potential bacterial contamination or soil. It can be hard to know how and when to wash your produce, and there is a lot of information out there (FDA, 2023; FDA, 2024, Rohr, 2022), so follow the steps below:

Buying Produce

When buying melons, inspect the outside and select ones free of cuts, bruises, or other damage. Separately bag produce from raw meat and poultry products. If you're purchasing pre-cut, bagged, or packaged produce, only buy items that are stored on ice or in a refrigerator. If available, utilize insulated grocery bags or coolers to keep produce cool during transport.

Washing Produce

Start by washing your hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds so you don't transfer germs to your own produce. Remove any damaged areas on your fruits and vegetables before washing. Wash fruits and vegetables under clean running water before consuming or cooking. While washing produce reduces microorganisms on the surfaces of fruits and vegetables, washing will not eliminate all microorganisms (FDA, 2024).



Image 1. Person washing hands with soap and clean, running water (Photo Credit: Rawpixel).

How do I wash... delicate produce?

Berries, grapes, greens, and anything that is delicate and/or soft skinned should be carefully washed under clean, running water with clean hands. Do not scrub. Do not use a soap or detergent, and always use water that is warmer than your produce. Do not use bleach or vinegar. Your produce is porous and can absorb both chemicals from these cleaning and sanitizing agents and anything unsanitary in your water. After washing, carefully dry fruits and vegetables with a clean cloth or paper towel.



Image 2. Washing tomatoes under clean, running water (Photo Credit: Flickr, JaBB).

How do I wash... firm produce?

Cucumbers, pumpkins, potatoes, winter squash, radishes, and other firm produce can be scrubbed with a clean produce brush under clean running water. After washing, carefully dry fruits and vegetables with a clean cloth or paper towel.



Image 3. Person washing potato with food grade brush with clean, running water (Photo Credit: Walmart – Hesroicy Food Grade Cleaning Produce Brush).

Do I need to wash bagged salad? Do I need to wash other greens?

Pre-packaged leafy green salads in sealed bags marked as "washed," "triple washed," or "ready-to-eat," do not need to be washed. These products are made in facilities following Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) and unless washing before use has been noted on the label, washing is not necessary. In cases where leafy greens are not in a sealed package, or labeled as described above, rinse with clean water before use with clean hands. Utilize a colander and low-pressure water to rinse your greens. Using higher pressure water can bruise your greens.



Image 4. Person washing lettuce under clean, running water (Photo: Kampus Productions).

What about organic fruits and vegetables? Those are safe to eat without washing, right?

Wrong! Keep in mind that even Certified Organic producers can utilize pesticides during the growing of fruits and vegetables. In terms of washing, organic and convention fruits and vegetables follow the same best practices as described above (i.e., when to wash or not). Don't be fooled by labels—unless the product indicates that it has been washed like the pre-packaged, bagged salad example, you should wash it.

Additional Resources

Food and Drug Administration (FDA). 2023. 7 Tips for Cleaning Fruits, Vegetables. Available at: <https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/7-tips-cleaning-fruits-vegetables>. Accessed April 3, 2024.

Food and Drug Administration (FDA). 2024. Selecting and Serving Produce Safely. Available at: <https://www.fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/selecting-and-serving-produce-safely>. Accessed April 3, 2024.

Rohr, M. 2022. Salad Safety: K-State food scientist shares tips on caring for packaged greens. Available at: <https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/news/stories/2022/10/food-science-packaged-lettuce.html>. Accessed April 8, 2024.

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