

Raw Sprouts & Food Safety

The trend to eat locally-sourced food continues to grow. Many people are supplementing their groceries with food purchased at farms and markets. Growing backyard gardens has become common for many families. We are also looking for ways to add more variety to our diets and seeking foods with superior nutritional value. One type of food product, raw sprouts, meets these qualifications. Sprouts are fast and easy to grow and have a high nutritional value. There's a catch though. Sprouts have been associated with numerous foodborne illnesses over the last couple of decades and the FDA does not recommend eating raw or lightly cooked sprouts.

Sprouts are the germinated seeds of herbaceous plants. Simply put, they are the tender edible shoot of germinated beans. Many types of seeds can be used but the Mung bean, lentils, soy and alfalfa are popular choices because they are easy to grow. Raw sprouts are most commonly eaten on salads and sandwiches.

Since 1996 there have been more than 30 reported outbreaks of foodborne illness associated with raw sprouts. Most of these outbreaks were caused by sprouts contaminated with *Salmonella*, *Listeria* and *E. coli* 0157. All fresh produce carries the risk of spreading foodborne pathogens but sprouts, because of their growing conditions, are especially problematic. Sprouts can be grown at any time of the year. There are many methods for sprouting seeds but the primary conditions necessary for germination are water and warmth. Unfortunately, water and warmth also provide an environment in which *Salmonella*, *Listeria* and *E. coli* 0157 thrive. It is widely believed that bacterial contamination

begins with the seeds. People who are growing sprouts at home are advised to research and carefully choose pathogen-free seeds. Additionally, extra safety precautions are required through each stage of growth and harvest.

The FDA does not recommend that anyone eat raw or lightly cooked sprouts. It is recommended that raw sprouts be thoroughly cooked before consumption. Unfortunately, cooked sprouts aren't very appealing to most people. Older people, children, pregnant women and people with compromised immune systems should not eat raw sprouts.

For those who love sprouts and want to continue to eat them raw or lightly cooked, the following precautions can be taken to promote safety.

- When buying sprouts, select only refrigerated ones and immediately refrigerate at home.
- Select only crisp sprouts.
- Discard sprouts that don't appear fresh or are past their "best use by" date.
- Thoroughly wash all sprouts before eating them but understand that this may not remove all bacteria adhering to the sprouts.
- When sprouting seeds at home, select "pathogen free seed". These seeds may be ordered from the following sources:
- Johnny's Selected Seed:
<http://www.johnnyseeds.com/c-245-sprouts.aspx>
Wheatgrass kits.com:
<http://www.wheatgrasskits.com/seed.htm>

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