

Safe Handling of Lettuce & Leafy Green Salads

Safe handling practices are crucial when preparing fresh lettuce and proper washing is fundamental to this process. Fresh lettuce may be picked from a garden, purchased at farmer's markets, produce stands and in grocery stores. The washing method that you use depends on how you obtain the lettuce and the type of packaging. When working with unpackaged lettuces washing is always required. If you are working with pre-packaged lettuce and salads you must carefully read the label to determine whether a product is one that should be washed before consumption. The following guidelines will help you determine how to properly wash and prepare various lettuces and leafy green salads.

“Ready to Eat” Lettuce/Leafy Green Salad

If a “ready to eat” lettuce or leafy green salad is received in either a sealed bag or rigid plastic container labeled "washed", "triple washed" or "ready-to-eat" it does not need additional washing before you eat it unless specifically directed on the label. Washing ready-to-eat green salads is not likely to enhance safety. Furthermore, the risk of cross contamination from handling and food contact surfaces may outweigh any safety benefit that further washing may have.

If you choose to wash “ready to eat” lettuce or salad before use, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds before handling and rewash hands as necessary. Clean the sink, colander, salad spinner and any utensils that will contact the lettuce with hot soapy water. Use cold running water to wash lettuce/leafy green salads to reduce the potential for cross contamination. Dry in a clean salad spinner or wipe dry with a paper towel that has not been previously used for another purpose.

Unpackaged Lettuces & Pre-Packaged Lettuce & Salads

Unpackaged lettuces including, produce grown conventionally or organically at home, produce that is purchased from a grocery store or farmer's market, and pre-packaged lettuces that are **NOT** labeled "washed", "triple washed" or "ready-to-eat" should be washed before consumption. For a thorough cleaning, fill a clean sink or bowl with lukewarm water, swish for 30 seconds, drain the water from the sink and rinse the sink free of any grit. Refill with clean cold water and repeat procedure two more times until no grit remains in the bottom of sink, when water is drained. For iceberg lettuce, remove the core, either by cutting around the core using a sharp knife or by pounding the core quite hard on a cutting board, and twist loose for easy removal. Hold upside down under running water and invert to drain. Dry lettuces by letting them drain in a colander and then wipe with a clean cloth towel or paper towel to reduce any bacteria that may be present.

Additional Safety Practices for Preparing All Types of Lettuces

Purchasing:

- Select lettuces that are not bruised or damaged.
- “Ready-to-eat” produce should be refrigerated or surrounded by ice.
- While shopping keep fresh produce in your cart separate from household chemicals and raw foods such as meat, poultry and seafood.
- Ensure that fresh produce is bagged separately at checkout.

Storing:

- Promptly refrigerate.
- Store separately from raw meat, poultry or seafood or their juices.
- Do not allow raw meat, poultry or seafood juices to drip onto the packaging.

Preparing:

- Thoroughly wash hands for 20 seconds with warm water and soap before and after preparing fresh produce.
- Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils, sinks and countertops with hot water.
- Cut away any damaged or bruised areas on lettuce before preparing and/or eating. Produce that looks rotten or moldy should be discarded.
- Discard ready-to-eat produce that has touched raw meat, poultry, or seafood.
- Store uneaten produce in the refrigerator or discard

Sources:

1. U.S. Food and Drug Administration, *Raw Produce: Selecting and Serving it Safely*, 2012, <http://www.fda.gov/food/resourcesforyou/consumers/ucm114299>
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3. Mary S. Palumbo et al, "Recommendations for Handling Fresh-cut Leafy Green Salads by Consumers and Retail Foodservice Operators," *Food Protection Trends*, Vol. 27, No 11, 2007, Pages 892-89, http://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/adap/foodsafety/News/Freshcut_Produce_ReWash_Recommendations2007.pdf
4. Irma S. Becker, Marion Rombauer Becker, and Ethan Becker, *The Joy of Cooking*, Simon & Schuster Inc., New York, 2006

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