

Arm yourself with a vegetable scrubber

A University of Nebraska–Lincoln food safety specialist said it is important to properly wash fresh produce before eating to reduce harmful microorganisms that could cause foodborne illness.

Wash produce with running water and then let that water go down the drain. Do not just soak the produce, said Julie Albrecht, UNL Extension food safety specialist at the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

If there is something on the outside of a food, soaking it could allow the microorganisms to spread to other parts of the food or to other produce in the same sink. Running water washes the microorganisms down the drain.

“It’s really just about preventing cross contamination,” Albrecht said. “Always use a colander or strainer so the water goes through the produce instead of just letting produce sit in water.”

It is important to wash all fresh produce, even ones with rinds that are not eaten, Albrecht said. Bacteria could be living on the surface and then spread to the inside of the fruit when the rind is cut.

Scrub foods with tough surfaces, such as melons and potatoes, with a vegetable scrubber.

Immediately refrigerate fresh produce after cutting it. Most fruits and vegetables can be stored at 40°F or below, which is cold enough to prevent microorganisms from growing.

“Once you cut something or peel it, keep it cold, refrigerate it. Do not let it sit out at room temperature because microorganisms grow best around temperatures of 80 to 100. Plus, your food will be crisper and of a better quality,” Albrecht said.

Leafy vegetables and tomatoes have been linked to foodborne illness outbreaks in recent years, so take extra care to wash them and keep them cold, Albrecht said.

Be sure to also wash hands, surfaces, and utensils before handling raw produce.

While shopping, only buy the best-looking produce that will stay fresh the longest. “Pick high-quality produce with no bumps or scratches at the peak of ripeness or maybe a little under ripe,” Albrecht said. “And make sure there is no mold, especially on berries.”

