

Food Safety

Do consumers need to be concerned about the safety of eating organic produce?

No more than they are about conventional food. Safe food production is the number one concern for **all** food producers. Certified organic growers follow strict guidelines for safe and hygienic food production. As with all food producers, they must comply with local, state and federal health standards. Pasteurization, selected use of chlorine, and other food safety practices also are allowed and followed in organic production. Consumers need to follow safe food handling, no matter what type of food they purchase.

Are organic products more likely to be contaminated by pathogenic microorganisms?

No, despite misleading statements in the press, there is no reputable scientific evidence to indicate that organic products pose an added risk of pathogenic contamination than any other produce. To address such statements, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued the following: "The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention...has not conducted any study that compares or quantitates the specific risk for infection with *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 and eating either conventionally grown or organic/natural foods. CDC recommends that growers practice safe and hygienic methods for producing food products, and that consumers, likewise, practice food safety within their homes (e.g., thoroughly washing fruits and vegetables)."

What does the organic industry do to ensure safe and wholesome produce?

Certified organic growers not only are inspected by third-party independent certifiers in order to qualify for organic certification, but they also follow strict guidelines for safe and hygienic food production. As with all food producers, they must be in compliance with local, state and federal health standards. Pasteurization, selected use of chlorine, and other food safety practices also are allowed and followed in organic production.

Conventional and organic agriculture both use manure as a part of regular farm soil fertilization programs. Certified organic farmers, however, must maintain a strict farm plan detailing the methods used to build soil fertility, including the application of manure as mandated by the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990. No other agricultural regulation in the United States imposes such strict control on the use of manure.

What can consumers do to minimize exposure to food-borne illnesses?

Statistics from CDC show that a vast majority of food-borne disease is associated with cross-contamination and handling later in the distribution chain and in the home. It is always important to be careful when handling any food. Eating meat that is rare or inadequately cooked is the most common way of getting infected. Person-to-person transmission also can occur if infected people do not adequately wash their hands.

Other tips to follow:

- Separate meats from fruits and vegetables in the shopping cart.
- Always wash fresh fruits and vegetables thoroughly in clean drinking water before eating them. Do not use detergent or bleach when washing fruits and vegetables.
- Thoroughly wash hands before preparing food and immediately after handling raw meat.
- Keep utensils and cutting boards separate for meats and vegetables.
- Wash all countertops and utensils thoroughly when handling food.
- Always clean any surface that has come in contact with raw meat before any other item is placed on that surface.
- Always cook meat until the juices run absolutely clear.
- Buy fresh-looking fruits and vegetables that are not bruised, shriveled, moldy, or slimy. Don't buy anything that smells bad. Don't buy packaged vegetables that look slimy. Buy only what you need.
- Handle fresh fruits and vegetables carefully. Put produce away promptly, and keep it in the crisper.
- Remember to keep all cut fruits and vegetables covered in the refrigerator, and throw away produce you have kept too long.
- Store prepared fruit salads and other cut produce in the refrigerator until just before serving.
- Discard produce you have kept too long. Throw away cut produce that has been out of the refrigerator for four hours or more.