FN690 (Reviewed Nov. 2026)

The pick of the season:

Keeping Fruits and Vegetables Fresh and Safe from Plant to Palate

Julie Garden-Robinson, Ph.D., R.D., L.R.D.
Food and Nutrition Specialist

Whether you grow your own produce or buy it at a farmers market or grocery store, fruits and vegetables are a colorful – and healthful – part of our diets.

Eat a Rainbow of Produce Colors!

Fruits and vegetables are low in calories and high in fiber and beneficial plant chemicals.

Our nutrition needs vary depending on our age, gender and physical activity. On average, the recommendation is 3 servings of vegetables and 2 servings of fruit daily. In general, 1 cup of raw or cooked vegetables or vegetable juice or 2 cups of raw leafy greens can be considered as 1 cup from the vegetable group. In general, 1 cup of fruit or 100% fruit juice or ½ cup of dried fruit can be considered as 1 cup from the fruit group.



Being Picky About Produce

For the best quality produce and to avoid throwing away spoiled produce, select an amount that you can use within a short time. Follow these tips when choosing fresh produce:

- If you're picking your own, be sure to bring clean containers or bags.
- Look for produce that is free from unusual odors or colors and signs of spoilage, such as mold.
- Handle produce gently to reduce bruising. Bacteria can thrive in the bruised areas. At the grocery store, keep fresh produce on top of other foods in a shopping cart – and separate from fresh meat – and set it down gently on the counter at the checkout line.
- Remember that buying underripe produce isn't always the best option. Peaches, cantaloupe and nectarines are examples of fruits that may soften during storage, but they won't ripen.
- When buying cut produce, be sure it's refrigerated and keep it cold during transport. Keep it in a cooler with ice if traveling a distance.

Savoring Safety by the Forkful

Even though fruits, vegetables and juice are nutritious parts of the diet, you need to take some food safety precautions. For example, contaminated melons, sprouts and raspberries have been linked with foodborne illness outbreaks. Here are some food safety tips:

- Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water before handling produce and any other food.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables with cool running tap water right before eating. Don't use dish soap or detergent because these products are not approved or labeled by the Food and Drug Administration for use on foods.

- Scrub melons with a brush and running water because bacteria can be transferred from the outside of the melon to the inside by a knife.
- Don't cross-contaminate: Use clean utensils and cutting boards when peeling or cutting up produce. Wash cutting boards with soap and water, rinse and sanitize between uses. A solution of 1 teaspoon of bleach per quart of water is considered safe and effective.
- Cut away bruised parts before eating. Remove the outer leaves from lettuce and cabbage.
- Avoid serving sprouts to at-risk populations such as the very young, old or those whose immune system isn't able to function at normal levels. For example, people undergoing cancer treatment often cannot eat fresh produce.
- Keep fresh cut produce cold by placing serving containers on ice. Perishable food should spend no more than two hours in the "danger zone" (40 to 140 degrees Fahrenheit).
- Refrigerate cut produce and use within a few days.

Pressing Facts About Apple Juice

When fruit is pressed to make juice, any bacteria on the outside could get into the juice. Given enough time and the right temperature, bacteria can grow to levels that could cause illness. Most types of bacteria grow well between 60 and 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

Unpasteurized apple juice has been linked with many cases of foodborne illness and even death due to contamination with E. coli O157:H7. Nearly all juice sold in grocery stores is pasteurized or heat-treated to kill bacteria. Most of the outbreaks have been associated with unpasteurized juice sold at roadside stands or farmers markets. While the immune systems of healthy adults may be able to tolerate bacteria in freshly pressed, unheated juice, young children or the elderly could become very ill.

Unpasteurized juice must carry a warning label in grocery stores. If you make your own juice, wash the fruit before pressing and heat the juice to at least 160 degrees Fahrenheit to kill bacteria. Store the juice in the refrigerator and use it within a few days.

Baking Summer Treats

Fruit pies, cobblers/crisps and kuchen are mouth-watering desserts using summer's bounty. If they're custard-based and allowed to stand in the sun at picnics, bake sales or food stands, they could be a food safety issue. Keep custard-containing items in coolers on ice before serving and during transport.

Saving Those Summer Selections

Fruits and vegetables can be preserved by dehydrating, freezing and canning, and using up-to-date recommendations is important. If you are tempted by home-canned goods at bake sales or farmers markets, remember they are not tested for safety as are commercial products. You will be eating them at your own risk. In fact, home-canned goods cannot be served at public events, according to health department regulations. These are a few home food preservation tips to ensure safe food in your cupboard:

- Use a pressure canner and current U.S. Department of Agriculture processing guidelines to can low-acid foods such as vegetables and meats.
- Acidify tomatoes with the recommended amount of lemon juice or citric acid prior to canning.
- Use research-tested salsa recipes, and don't alter ingredient proportions. If you have a favorite salsa recipe, freeze it.
- Seal jams and jellies with a regular canning lid (not wax) and process in a boiling water bath for five to 10 minutes, depending on altitude.
- Store canned goods in a cool, dark place. For best quality, use home-canned goods within one year.

For more information about food preservation and other food safety issues, contact your local county office of NDSU Extension or visit the NDSU Extension website:

www.ag.ndsu.edu/food

NDSU Extension does not endorse commercial products or companies even though reference may be made to tradenames, trademarks or service names.

For more information on this and other topics, see www.ndsu.edu/extension

North Dakota State University is an equal opportunity educator and employer. This work is supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Requests for accommodations related to disability may be made at 701-231-1865.

web-2-09; 8-11; 8-16; web 12-21; web-11-26