



## GUIDELINE FOR HANDLING FRESH FRUITS AND VEGETABLES IN FOOD ESTABLISHMENTS

There has been an increasing number of food-borne illness outbreaks linked to fresh fruits and vegetables (fresh produce) in recent years. People have gotten sick after eating lettuce, spinach, tomatoes, bean sprouts, and melons. Every food establishment that serves or sells fresh produce must handle the produce in a safe and sanitary manner in order to provide the public with the safest food possible.

1. Raw fresh fruits and vegetables must be thoroughly washed in water to remove soil and other contaminants before being cut, combined with other ingredients, cooked, or served to the customer in a form ready to be eaten.
2. Pre-packaged fresh fruits and vegetables that are **labeled “ready-to-eat”, “washed” or “triple washed”** and were processed in a facility inspected by a regulatory authority are not required to be washed in the retail food establishment before use or service, unless specifically directed on the label. These products are ready to be eaten and must be properly handled and protected just like any other ready-to-eat foods. Re-washing may be done but is generally not recommended since the produce was processed in a controlled food manufacturing environment. If harmful “germs” are still present in the fresh produce after commercial washing treatments, it is not likely that re-washing in a retail food establishment will remove or destroy the germs. In fact, the risk of cross-contamination from food handlers and unclean food equipment in the retail setting may over-ride any safety benefit that further washing may deliver.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HANDLING RAW FRESH PRODUCE:

Buy fruits and vegetables from reputable sources. Know your suppliers. Avoid fresh produce that is excessively soiled or has visible mold, discoloration, or off odors.

Store your fresh produce properly. Prevent cross-contamination. Segregate raw meats and poultry from fruits and vegetables by storing raw meats and poultry on separate shelves in the refrigerator. Never store raw meat, fish or poultry above produce.

Discard the outer leaves of leafy vegetables such as lettuce and cabbage before washing. Remove wilted discolored, damaged or bruised portions; studies have shown that if lettuce or other leafy greens have visible rot or decay, there is a possible increased risk of having harmful germs present.

Rinse fresh fruits and vegetables thoroughly under running tap water to remove surface contamination. Fresh produce having a firm skin or hard rind like carrots, potatoes, melons or squash may be scrubbed with a clean vegetable brush while rinsing. Wash all whole fruits and vegetables (especially melons) before preparing them – even if the skin or rind will not be eaten. This helps to prevent germs from being transferred from the outer skin to the inside of the fruit or vegetable when it is cut.

If fresh produce is soaked in a sink or tub during the washing procedure, extra care must be taken to prevent cross-contamination. The wash sinks or containers must be cleaned and sanitized before use. The water must be kept clean and must be changed at an appropriate frequency. Water used in the washing of the produce could spread contamination if the wash water contains germs or other harmful substances. A series of washes may be needed. If anti-microbial products are used in the wash water, these products must be approved by EPA or FDA for such use. They must be properly labeled and used according to directions provided by the manufacturer. Household bleach is generally not acceptable for this use. Anti-microbial disinfectant concentrations should be checked to make sure that proper levels are maintained during the soaking or washing. It must be understood that the purpose of the disinfectant in the wash water is to prevent germs from being spread by contaminated wash water, NOT to “sanitize” or kill germs on the surface of the produce being washed. Germs can stick to the surface of fruits and vegetables and may be found in the cracks and crevices where water and wash water disinfectants cannot reach.

**After fresh produce is washed and prepared, it must be handled like any other ready-to-eat food.**

Good hygienic practices are extremely important. Workers must wash hands properly before handling the fruits and vegetables. Whenever possible, avoid using bare hands to touch the washed produce or any other ready-to-eat food (instead use utensils or disposable gloves). Any utensil, equipment or surface that will touch the fresh produce must be properly washed, rinsed and sanitized (e.g. colanders, knives, peelers, vegetable scrub brushes, cutting boards, sinks, countertops, storage containers). If possible, provide separate work areas for preparing fresh produce and meat/poultry/fish products, or at least use different knives and cutting boards for cutting fresh produce and meat products. Store the prepared foods in covered containers. Prevent cross-contamination!

**TEMPERATURE REQUIREMENTS FOR HOLDING FRUITS AND VEGETABLES:**

“Potentially hazardous foods” are foods in which harmful germs can grow and multiply to levels that can make people sick. Meat (beef and pork), poultry (chicken, turkey), seafood (fish, shellfish, crustaceans), eggs, milk and other dairy products are all potentially hazardous; in most cases these foods must be either kept cold (45°F or below) or hot (140°F or above) in order to prevent germs from growing and to keep the food safe for eating.

Fruits and vegetables can also be potentially hazardous!!!! RAW seed sprouts, CUT melons, and CUT tomatoes are potentially hazardous and MUST be kept cold at 45°F or below (they have caused many food-borne illness outbreaks nationwide). Once any fruit or vegetable has been cooked or “heat-treated”, it becomes potentially hazardous (germs can grow to dangerous levels in it).

Other raw fresh fruits and vegetables, although not considered “potentially hazardous”, should be stored and displayed under refrigeration for best quality.

◆◆◆NOTE: This guideline is not intended to cover all possible situations regarding fresh produce. For questions or comments, please contact the Department of Health at the following:

Sanitation Branch – Oahu	(808) 586-8000	Sanitation Branch – Maui	(808) 984-8230
Sanitation Branch – Hilo	(808) 933-0917	Sanitation Branch – Kauai	(808) 241-3323
Sanitation Branch – Kona	(808) 322-1507	Food and Drug Branch	(808) 586-4725