

# 6 Rules for Washing Fruits and Vegetables

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By Susan McQuillan

Fruits and vegetables are some of the healthiest foods you can eat—unless they're contaminated with dirt, pesticides, or harmful bacteria. So before you take your first bite, make sure you follow these six steps.

Fruits and vegetables are some of the healthiest foods you can eat—unless they're contaminated with dirt or harmful bacteria. Since foodborne illnesses have sometimes been linked to fresh produce, it's important to wash what you eat.

The first rule for washing fresh produce is to wash your own hands. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends washing hands for 20 minutes with warm water and soap before and after cleaning fresh fruits and vegetables. This includes produce labeled "pre-washed" and "ready to eat," and helps avoid cross-contamination when handling different types of food.

**Wash everything.** The FDA notes that all fruits and vegetables should be well washed under running water before eating, no matter where it comes from or how it was grown, including organic and home-grown produce. They do not recommend using household soap or detergents, or even products sold as produce washes. Fruits and vegetables have porous surfaces that can absorb any cleaning products used.

**Use plain water.** Plain distilled water was found to be a more effective cleaner than commercial produce washing products in a test performed by members of the Department of Food Science and Nutrition at the University of Maine. If you're likely to pick up an apple or other fresh fruits or vegetables to eat on the run, the department suggests carrying a small spray bottle of distilled water—which is purified—to clean the food before you eat.

**Use clean equipment.** Make sure your counters, cutting boards and other surfaces that come in contact with fresh fruits and vegetables are all clean. Wash all surfaces and utensils with hot soapy water immediately after preparing food.

**Wash skins and rinds.** Wash whole fruits and vegetables even if you plan to peel them or remove an outer skin. Use a clean produce brush to scrub firm produce and tough exterior skins and rinds under running water. This will prevent any dirt or bacteria on the outside from contaminating the flesh on the inside of the fruit or vegetable.

**Time it right.** Wash fruits and vegetables just before cooking or serving, not before storing. Washing fresh produce and then storing it is likely to speed up spoilage.

**Blot it dry.** Dry food off with a clean paper or cloth towel to further reduce any possible bacteria. According to registered dietitian Alice Henneman, of the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension, this is especially important if food will not be eaten or cooked right away because moisture left on the surface of food can promote the growth of bacteria and other microorganisms.

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