Friday’s Feature
By
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Keep your family safe by understanding more about tomato contamination

Recent outbreaks of salmonellosis associated with the consumption of fresh tomatoes caused many restaurants to remove raw tomatoes from their menus. In order to keep your family safe, the University of Florida answers some of your questions.

Q. How does Salmonella and other pathogens contaminate tomatoes and other produce?
There is no quick answer to this question. Scientists are still debating the most likely routes of contamination. It is possible for produce to be contaminated at various stages, including during the growing, harvesting, cleaning, washing and distribution. In the field, fruits and vegetables can be contaminated by coming in contact with animal manure or poultry litter that was improperly composted. Cross-contamination in retail stores and during food preparation at home and in restaurants has also been documented.

Q. Are tomatoes from farmers' markets included in this outbreak?
Farmers' markets get their tomatoes from a variety of sources that are not necessarily limited to local farms. These other sources may include the same ones that provided the tomatoes implicated in the Salmonella outbreak. Consumers should ask retailers at farmers' markets what the sources of their tomatoes are, and frequently check FDA updates at http://www.fda.gov/oc/opacom/hottopics/tomatoes.html for states and countries not associated with the outbreak.

Q. During this outbreak, is it safer to eat locally grown tomatoes?
Consumers should confirm with their retailers the sources of tomatoes advertised as "locally grown." Consumers also are reminded that cherry tomatoes, grape tomatoes, and tomatoes with the vine still attached are not implicated in this outbreak, regardless of where they were grown, harvested, or packed. Tomatoes grown at home also are not implicated in the outbreak.

Q. Is there anything consumers can do to reduce the risk of infection?
1) When selecting fruits and vegetables at the market, do not pick damaged produce. Additionally, avoid selecting fruits and vegetables that are too soft or have translucent skin.
2) Store your produce dry and in a cool place. While storing produce at cooler temperatures does not consistently reduce potential contamination, it may help prevent any pathogens that may already be present.
from multiplying to levels more likely to be dangerous to humans.

3) Never soak vegetables in water. Soaking fresh vegetables in water may increase the chance that any bacteria present on the surface of the vegetable will infiltrate into the inner tissues.

4) Fruits and vegetables that have been minimally processed (i.e. thoroughly washed and brushed, cut, sliced, peeled, lightly cooked, etc) should be stored refrigerated and only for a limited time.

5) Clean your refrigerator. Regularly wipe refrigerator shelves and crispers with a household cleaner.

6) Washing produce is an important way to remove some contamination on the surface of fruits and vegetables. Thoroughly washing produce in warm water with common detergents reduces, but does completely eliminate bacteria on surfaces of tomatoes. Fruits and vegetables should be washed under clean, running warm water. Do not wash your vegetables or fruits in bleach solutions as they are not considered safe for consumption. Wash fruits and vegetables immediately prior to eating them. In terms of produce with rough surfaces, such as strawberries, broccoli and cauliflower, washing is only slightly effective in removing pathogens.

7) When slicing tomatoes, cut out the stem scar, the corky area on top of a tomato fruit that was attached to the stem. Studies show that the stem scar can contain higher numbers of bacteria.

8) When preparing fruits and vegetables at home, avoid cross-contamination of fruits and vegetables from meats, poultry, and seafood, as well as from vegetables (such as potatoes and leeks) and cucurbits (melons, squash) that are normally soiled.

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