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Washing Fruits and Vegetables

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Mom was right! Eating more veggies and fruit will improve our diets and our personal fitness. Nutritionists recommend that consumers eat at least five servings or more of fruits and vegetables every day. But along with the increased emphasis on “five a day,” has come concern about the effects of pesticide residues and bacteria left on fresh produce.

Into the vacuum created by consumers’ concerns have stepped a whole industry of produce washes to clean fruits and vegetables. You have probably seen them at the entrance to the produce section of your local supermarket. These products claim to neutralize pesticide residues, remove wax from the surface of produce such as cucumbers, apples and oranges, and to kill dangerous bacteria such as *E. coli*. Some of these products claim to remove more dirt than water alone.

But does the research on these products match the claims made in the commercials? Tests conducted at the University of Wisconsin, Colorado State University, and the University of Maine say that while these products are safe to use, nothing indicates that they are any more effective than using cold water and a vegetable brush—when a brush is appropriate—to clean your produce. So you might be spending more money than you need to.

The Food and Drug Administration says that all fruits and vegetables, including those that are organically grown, could benefit from a thorough washing to reduce soil, surface microbes and some pesticides. Ann Zander, with Colorado State University’s Cooperative Extension Service, points

out that an average of four people handled your apple before you chose it and up to 20 may have handled your tomato.

The following steps will limit the amount of residues and bacteria on your produce.

- To help remove exterior bacteria, rinse all produce under running tap water. Don’t fill your sink with water and let produce soak there.
- Produce such as melons, cucumbers, winter squash, citrus fruit and potatoes should be scrubbed with a brush. Potatoes and melons have grooves which mean your hands can’t rub off all the dirt, then when you cut into them, any dirt from the outside is transferred to the inside.
- Bananas need to be rinsed off as well. Imagine how many hands touch the fruit before it gets to your mouth. Your hands could transfer the bacteria on the unwashed peel to the inside flesh.
- Experts at the FDA recommend removing the outer layer of leafy vegetables like lettuce and cabbage before thoroughly rinsing the leaves in water. They recommend rinsing until you can’t see any visible dirt. Lettuce can be spun dry in a vegetable dryer. If you are saving your lettuce and cabbage for later consumption, dry off the leaves before refrigerating them to prevent the growth of bacteria.
- Bunched fruit like blueberries or grapes

need to be rinsed under running water in a colander. A spray nozzle is easiest to use here.

- Use hot, soapy water to clean your utensils and cutting boards after preparing each food item.

Some consumers are using mild detergents and soap to clean their produce. Neither the USDA nor FDA recommends washing fruits and vegetables in anything but cold, drinkable water. Dish soaps have not been approved as a food cleaning items and a soapy residue left on the produce can cause diarrhea. They can also change the flavor of your produce.

After shopping at the store or farmer's market, it is best to put produce away promptly and use it within a few days of purchase. Wash your hands and counters before preparing any food, especially when the food is fresh vegetables or fruit.

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