

A Consumer's Guide to Washing Ready-to-Eat Lettuce/ Leafy Green Salads Script

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Slide One: What is a ready-to-eat lettuce/ leafy green salad? Ready-to-eat lettuce is a prepackaged, pre-cut salad that is meant for direct consumer consumption without any further prep work. This means that the salad can go straight from the bag to your plate and then to your mouth without any other handling. Iceberg lettuce, romaine lettuce, green leaf lettuce, red leaf lettuce, butter lettuce, baby leaf lettuce, escarole, endive, spring mix and spinach all may be available as ready-to-eat lettuce/leafy green salads.

Slide Four: Why should we care about ready-to-eat salads? Because we are buying a lot of them! Health and convenience are the two factors consumers consider most when shopping. These factors have caused the popularity of ready-to-eat salads to grow exponentially over the last couple of years. Also, it has been found that 6% of consumers seldom or never wash fresh produce before they consume it. By consuming pre-washed ready-to-eat salads, these consumers are greatly reducing their risk for food-borne illnesses.

Slide Five: Many human pathogens (virus, bacteria and parasites) have been found in fresh produce, but *Salmonella* and *E. coli* have been found in fresh produce contamination incidents increasingly frequently in recent years. Both of these bacterial pathogens are spread by fecal matter somehow getting on the produce. Humans then ingest the contaminated food product. Fecal matter can get on produce via soil, water, animals, and human contact. By using ready-to-eat salad products, you are reducing the amount of contact between outside sources and your food. This helps to reduce the risk of cross-contamination. Preventing food-borne illnesses is extremely important. According to the FDA, 2-3% of food-borne illnesses may lead to the development of other long-term illnesses, such as kidney failure or even arthritis.

Slide Six: You can decrease your risk of buying spoiled produce by keeping in mind several factors. Ready-to-eat produce should be kept either refrigerated or on ice in order to maintain its integrity. If the produce is not being kept cold, there is an increased risk of spoilage, and you run a greater risk of getting sick. If you are unsure if certain produce looks spoiled, ask your produce manager. He or she is well-trained and well-informed and will know whether produce is safe to buy.

Slide Seven: With all the recent cases of salad contamination, you may be wondering if you should wash your ready-to-eat salad before you consume it. This is an especially

important concern if you have children, elderly people, or people with weakened immune systems in your household. These population groups are at an increased risk of contracting food-borne illness.

Slide Eight: If your salad meets the three criteria listed on this slide—it is a pre-washed bagged salad, it has been kept refrigerated, and it is being used before the use-by date—then you do NOT have to wash your salad.

Slide Nine: All ready-to-eat salad products that are labeled *washed*, *triple-washed*, or *ready-to-eat* go through the same washing process. This is a three-step process that consists of washing the produce in fresh water to remove debris, followed by multiple thorough chlorinated baths. This process results in a cleaner salad than simply rinsing the salad under tap water, as you would at home.

Slide Ten: If the product has not been labeled *washed*, *triple-washed*, or *ready-to-eat* and there are no instructions telling you that you do not need to wash the product, then you should always take the cautious route and wash the produce. If you have already opened a bag of ready-to-eat salad and left it in the refrigerator, make sure you wash the salad the next time you eat it. An open bag makes it easy for the produce to become contaminated by drips and spills from products that are stored around it. Microbes also bind to cut surfaces better than they bind to uncut surfaces. This is a potential problem, since most ready-to-eat salads contain cut leaf pieces. Washing the salad will help to reduce its risk of being contaminated.

Slide Eleven: Now that I know when I HAVE to wash my produce, is it better to just wash it all, even if it has been "triple-washed" before packaging?

Slide Twelve: Washing the ready-to-eat salad will not necessarily make it safer to eat; in fact, it may do more harm than good. Most bacteria on the salad will be killed off during the vigorous washing techniques that are performed in factories that package ready-to-eat salads. The salads are washed in a very sterile environment that is much cleaner than your average household kitchen. Any bacteria that are resistant to the cleansers at the packaging site are also likely to be resistant to at-home rinsing. Another factor to consider is that when you are washing your produce at home, you are exposing it to the risk of cross-contamination from other products in your kitchen, such as meat. The less handling of the food, the less risk the food has of becoming cross-contaminated.

Slide Thirteen: If you do want to wash your ready-to-eat salad, there are techniques that can reduce the risk of cross-contamination. Preventing contamination is important because it is a lot harder to kill the pathogens than to prevent them from being there in the first place.

Slide Fourteen: If you are going to wash your ready-to-eat salads, then there are four important rules to remember. The first rule is that you should wash your hands with soap

for at least 20 seconds. If you sing the “ABC” song once or "Happy Birthday" twice while washing, you will have achieved this goal.

Slide Fifteen: Rule two is to make sure you clean any utensil that will come in contact with the salad with warm soapy water. If you set a utensil down while you are preparing the food, make sure you rewash it before it comes into contact with the clean produce again.

Slide Sixteen: It is important to wash the salad in cold running water. You want to make sure that the water is running in order to decrease the risk of contamination by dirty water.

Slide Seventeen: Microbes like moisture. If you do not dry your produce, the water on the product will encourage microbial growth and survival.

Slide Eighteen: Never use bleach or other detergents on your produce. These products are not meant to be consumed and can cause you physical harm.

Slide Nineteen: Fight Bac™ is a program developed by the Partnership for Food Safety Education in order to educate consumers about ways that they can limit the risk of contamination in their homes. Most contamination that occurs when preparing food items happens in the home.

Slide Twenty: There are five steps to remember as you learn to prevent food-borne illness in the home. They are: check, clean, separate, chill, and throw away (otherwise known as CCSCCT). In the next few slides, we will go over these techniques in more detail.

Slide Twenty-one: Before you buy your produce, you need to make sure that it is not bruised or damaged. Bruising may be a sign of spoiled produce that can make you sick if eaten. Also make sure that your produce is being refrigerated. Produce that is not refrigerated is at increased risk of spoilage, and spoilage increases the risk that the produce will develop pathogens.

Slide Twenty-two: Clean everything! You need to clean your hands, countertops and all utensils that may come in contact with your ready-to-eat salad. When your salad is ready to be served, make sure you use a clean serving utensil. You do not want to use the same serving utensil for meat as you are using for salad. You must either wash the utensil in between uses or use different utensils for different foods.

Slide Twenty-three: Cutting boards, utensils and dishes may be sanitized with bleach or other detergents. If you use plastic cutting boards or any other nonporous cutting boards, you can put them in the dishwasher after use for a more vigorous wash. If you use wooden cutting boards, you can clean them by hand using a bleach solution. Make sure

you rinse all surfaces well with hot running water after using bleach. You do not want to consume the bleach!

Slide Twenty-four: It is important to keep your food items separate in your shopping cart, in your refrigerator, and in your kitchen. You never want to mix ready-to-eat salads with meat products or their juices. Always keep produce away from household chemicals and meat in your shopping cart. This also applies to how you bag your food items. Always make sure your produce is bagged separately from meat and chemicals.

Slide Twenty-seven: The optimal temperature to prevent spoilage of pre-cut produce is 40°F or lower. Check your refrigerator temperature often with a thermometer to verify that it is at the correct temperature.

Slide Twenty-eight: Make sure you look to see what the use-by date is on your ready-to-eat produce. Use-by dates are different from purchase-by dates. A use-by date is the date the manufacturer recommends a product should be consumed by to avoid spoilage. The use-by date is usually after the purchase-by date. You can consume the product after the purchase-by date; however, you should NOT consume the product after the use-by date.