

Food Safety at the Supermarket

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Unless you grow all of your own food, you're probably a regular at the neighborhood supermarket. I appreciate that many supermarkets are taking strategic steps to ensure the freshness and safe handling of foods and making food safety a priority. For example, I'm a big fan of those disinfecting wipes provided at the entrances to most supermarkets.



By wiping down shopping cart handles and baby seats, (and I take an extra one to clean my own hands), I can help avoid cross-contaminating my groceries with pathogens introduced by previous shoppers. Another example is the availability of plastic bags in the meat and seafood departments for double-bagging those sometimes leaky packages.

An article I spotted in a recent [AARP Bulletin](#) offers handy advice on grocery shopping with food safety in supermarkets in mind. The tips below, organized by supermarket section, are based on that article.

When choosing items in...	Stay alert...	Because...
Produce Department 	Avoid bruised produce	Not only do they look unappealing, but bruised fruits and veggies give bacteria easy access to the inner flesh
	Avoid produce that has attracted fruit flies	Fruit flies signal that food is leaking, breaking down, wilting or moldy
	If you want to purchase cut produce, be sure it is refrigerated	Chilled cut produce is less likely to harbor

	or on ice	bacteria than cut produce at room temperature
	If you must lick fingers to retrieve a plastic bag, only lick the fingers of one hand; use the other hand to handle the produce	Saliva from shoppers is transferred to produce when shoppers lick their fingers to release and open a plastic produce bag

A note about organic produce: Organic fruits and veggies may be free of pesticides and synthetic fertilizer, but they are no safer from microbes than traditionally grown produce, so stay alert, as cautioned above.

<p style="text-align: center;">Deli</p> 	Deli servers should never touch cold cuts with bare hands; they should change gloves between serving customers and every time they serve food with a hand that touched door handles, equipment or other surfaces	Hands transfer pathogens from one surface to another
	Deli servers should not wear dirty aprons; they should clean their hands with a towel stored in sanitizer	Dirty aprons can signal that the server is cleaning his/her hands on their apron; contaminants on aprons can build up and spread to other surfaces

<p style="text-align: center;">Meat/Seafood Departments</p> 	Use plastic bags to double-bag meat and seafood purchases; pick up the product using the bag as a glove on your hand and then pull the bag over the package to avoid hand contact with the package	Double-bagging meat and seafood purchases helps prevent cross-contaminating your other groceries
	Meat packages that are stacked higher than the "load limit line" (see this line marked within cabinet walls) of refrigeration cases may not be cold enough	Higher than recommended temperatures (40 degrees F for meat) in refrigeration cases can accelerate food spoilage
	Fish and seafood should not smell of ammonia	An ammonia odor indicates fish and seafood are starting to decay
	Fish and seafood should be kept refrigerated, on ice, or both; if kept	Fish and seafood are highly perishable

	only on ice, fish and seafood should be buried in ice, not simply placed on top of ice	
	Raw and cooked foods should not be in contact	Physical contact between raw and cooked foods can contaminate cooked foods
<p style="text-align: center;">Salad Bar</p> 	Salad bar should not look messy	A messy salad bar suggests no one is stocking and cleaning it
	Salad greens should not be wilted	Wilted greens could indicate the wrong temperature or too long a period at the salad bar, conditions that invite bacterial contamination
	Fresh food should not be dumped on top of older food	This could invite bacterial contamination; if food levels are low, containers should be removed and replaced with freshly filled containers
	Utensil handles should not touch food	Utensil handles should be long enough that they are not in contact with food; utensils with handles that are too short can spread pathogens from customers' hands to food
	Salad dressing containers should be labeled	Unlabeled containers invite sampling with fingers, which can spread pathogens
<p style="text-align: center;">General - Packaged Groceries</p>	Expiration dates should be <i>future</i> dates	Consuming foods beyond their expiration date could put consumers at risk for foodborne illness
	Cans should be free of denting, bloating, rust and leaks	These could be signs of botulism, a potentially deadly

	<p>Cereal, rice and other dry food packaging should be free of water stains, rips and tears</p>	<p>foodborne illness</p> <p>Water stains may indicate the product became wet and moldy; rips and tears in packaging may indicate a pest has gotten into the food</p>
<p>Frozen Foods</p> 	<p>Frozen food packaging should be intact, not torn or broken</p>	<p>Torn or broken packaging may indicate a pest has gotten into the food or that food has become exposed to other types of contamination</p>
	<p>Foods should be frozen, not thawed</p>	<p>Freezer compartment foods should be held at zero degrees or lower</p>

It pays to know what to look for when it comes to food safety practices. Stay alert at the supermarket and stay safe!

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