



## PRODUCE - Safe Handling of Fresh Items Served in Schools

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**Fruits and vegetables.** So fresh, so colorful, so delicious, and healthy. Students love seeing fresh fruit and vegetable options when picking out their breakfast and lunch each time they visit the school cafeteria. Children can be healthier and improve their diets by eating more fruits and vegetables. School nutrition menu planners and kitchen managers are encouraged to incorporate fresh fruit and vegetable choices into their daily offerings to support healthy eating habits. *The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025* in conjunction with MyPlate recommends that children and adolescents consume anywhere from 1 cup to as much as 3.5 cups of fruits and vegetables each day. With so many children across the United States depending on the National School Breakfast and Lunch Programs for their meals,

it is important that food service programs provide an assortment of produce selections each and every day to help students meet their daily fruit and vegetable requirements.

As with any food product, you have to be careful in how you prepare and handle what you are about to eat. Harmful bacteria that may be in the soil or water where produce grows can come in contact with fruits and vegetables and contaminate them. Fresh produce may also become contaminated after it is harvested, such as during storage or preparation. In schools, it is up to the school nutrition professionals to ensure that the fruit and vegetable options are safe for program participants to eat. Before preparing anything, food handlers must wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water. Then, food service staff should wash, rinse, sanitize, and air-dry all food-contact surfaces, equipment, and utensils that will

be in contact with produce, such as cutting boards, knives, and sinks. By starting with these two important steps, food handlers are taking necessary steps to reduce the risk of exposure to harmful bacteria.

Wash all raw fruits and vegetables thoroughly before combining with other ingredients, including unpeeled fresh fruit and vegetables that are served whole or cut into pieces, and fruits and vegetables that are peeled and cut to use in cooking or served ready-to-eat. Wash fresh produce vigorously under cold running water or by using chemicals that comply with the most recent [FDA Food Code](#). Packaged fruits and vegetables labeled as being previously washed and ready-to-eat are not required to be washed. Scrub the surface of firm fruits or vegetables such as apples or potatoes using a clean and sanitized brush designated for this purpose. Remove any damaged or bruised areas, and discard produce that is unfit to serve program participants. When finished with prep work, be sure to label, date, and refrigerate fresh-cut items.

If placing fresh-cut items inside a walk-in cooler, it is important to place them in the correct section of the unit. Fruits, in general, will produce ethylene gas and can cause most vegetables to deteriorate more quickly and may make them unsuitable for consumption. Ideally, ethylene producing fruits should be stored separately if possible. A few examples of ethylene producing fruits are cantaloupe, oranges, peaches, and pineapples. In order to help with storage and organization, kitchen managers can create and label designated areas within the walk-in cooler units for fruits, vegetables, and other temperature-sensitive items such as dairy and products thawing for future use.

Consider implementing a HACCP-Based Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for washing fresh fruits and vegetables. The

purpose of the SOP is to prevent or reduce risk of food-borne illness or injury by contaminated fruits and vegetables. All new and current foodservice employees should be trained on using the procedures in this SOP upon hire, and then annually.

There are two words that can instantly spark concern while working in the food world: *Food Recall*. However, there is no need to panic if your establishment has thorough HACCP-Based SOP's in place for situations like this. In the event that produce purchased for your school cafeteria is recalled, kitchen managers and school nutrition administrators are responsible for tracing the produce one step back (trace back) to the supplier and one step forward (trace forward) to when and to whom it was served. It is important to maintain purchasing records for all produce. Make sure someone in each kitchen has contact information for fresh produce suppliers and can connect with them about products of concern. More than likely, your supplier will be the agency contacting you about the recall and relaying its details. Food handlers should also consider keeping fresh fruits and vegetables in their original packaging until the day of service to ensure you have accurate packing information if requested. It is also important to maintain production records so a kitchen manager can quickly and accurately review what was served, when it was served, and how much was served to program participants.

Finally, inform and work with your local health department if you have further questions about the recall and need help understanding. If your school district does not have one, consider implementing a HACCP-Based SOP for how to handle a food recall and conduct a periodic mock recall of fresh produce to test your internal tracking system.

Resources: <https://theicn.org/school-nutrition-programs/>, <https://www.myplate.gov/>, <https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/resources/2020-2025-dietary-guidelines-online-materials>.

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