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Washing Food: Does It Promote Food Safety?

Historically, we equate washing to cleanliness. We wash clothes, linens, cars, dishes, and ourselves. So, it is logical that many people believe meat and poultry can be made cleaner and safer by washing it. Is this true? Does washing meat, poultry, eggs, fruits, and vegetables make them safer to eat?

Washing Meat and Poultry

Washing raw poultry, beef, pork, lamb, or veal before cooking it is not recommended. Bacteria in raw meat and poultry juices can be spread to other foods, utensils, and surfaces. We call this cross-contamination.

Some consumers think they are removing bacteria and making their meat or poultry safe. However, some of the bacteria are so tightly attached that you could not remove them no matter how many times you washed. But there are other types of bacteria that can be easily washed off and splashed on the surfaces of your kitchen. Failure to clean these contaminated areas can lead to foodborne illness. Cooking (baking, broiling, boiling, and grilling) to the right temperature kills the bacteria, so washing food is not necessary.

Using a food thermometer is the only sure way of knowing if your food has reached a high enough temperature to destroy foodborne bacteria. Cook all raw beef and veal steaks, roasts, and chops to a minimum internal temperature of 145°F as measured with a food thermometer before removing meat from the heat source. For safety and quality, allow meat to rest for at least three minutes before carving or consuming. For reasons of personal preference, consumers may choose to cook meat to higher temperatures.

Soaking Meat and Poultry

Callers to the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline sometimes ask about soaking poultry in salt water. This is a personal preference and serves no purpose for food safety. If you choose to do this, however, preventing cross-contamination when soaking and removing the poultry from the water is essential. Meat or poultry should be kept in the refrigerator while soaking.

Sometimes consumers wash or soak country ham, bacon, or salt pork because they think it reduces the sodium or salt enough to allow these products to be eaten on a sodium-restricted diet. However, very little salt is removed by washing, rinsing, or soaking a meat product and is not recommended.

Cross-Contamination

Hand washing after handling raw meat or poultry or its packaging is a necessity because anything you touch afterwards could become contaminated. In other words, you could become ill by picking up a piece of fruit and eating it after handling raw meat or poultry.

Wash hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds before and after handling food, and after using the bathroom, changing diapers, tending to a sick person, blowing your nose, sneezing and coughing, and handling pets.

It is important to prevent cross-contamination from raw meat or poultry juices by washing counter tops and sinks with hot, soapy water. For extra protection, you may sanitize with a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of water.

Packaging materials from raw meat or poultry also can cause cross-contamination. Never reuse them with other food items. These and other disposable packaging materials, such as foam meat trays, egg cartons, or plastic wraps, should be discarded.

Washing Eggs

Do not wash eggs before storing them. Washing is a routine part of commercial egg processing and the eggs do not need to be washed again. Federal regulations outline procedures and cleansers that may be used. "Bloom," the natural coating on just-laid eggs that helps prevent bacteria from permeating the shell, is removed by the washing process and is replaced by a light coating of edible mineral oil which restores protection. Extra handling of the eggs, such as washing, could increase the risk of cross-contamination, especially if the shell becomes cracked.

Washing Produce

Before eating or preparing fresh fruits and vegetables, wash the produce under cold running tap water to remove any lingering dirt. This reduces bacteria that may be present. If there is a firm surface, such as on apples or potatoes, the surface can be scrubbed with a brush. Consumers should not wash fruits and vegetables with detergent or soap. These products are not approved or labeled by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for use on foods. You could ingest residues from soap or detergent absorbed on the produce.

When preparing fruits and vegetables, cut away any damaged or bruised areas because bacteria that cause illness can thrive in those places. Immediately refrigerate any fresh-cut items such as salad or fruit for best quality and food safety.

Food Safety Questions?

Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline

If you have a question about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at



**1-888-MPHotline
(1-888-674-6854).**

The hotline is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (English or Spanish).

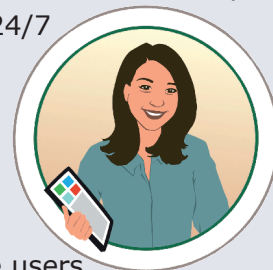
Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day. Check out the FSIS Web site at

www.fsis.usda.gov

Send E-mail questions to **MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov**.

AskKaren.gov

FSIS' automated response system can provide food safety information 24/7 and a live chat during Hotline hours.



Mobile phone users can access **m.askkaren.gov**

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