



FOOD SAFETY UPDATE

Paper, Plastic or Neither?

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When the clerk at the grocery store asks if you'd like paper or plastic for your purchases, consider the truly eco-friendly answer and say, "neither".



Plastic bags end up as litter that fouls the landscape and kill thousands of marine mammals every year that mistake the floating bags for food. Plastic bags that get buried in landfills may take up to 1,000 years to break down. Also, the production of plastic bags consume millions of gallons of oil.

Paper bags carry their own set of environmental problems. According to the American Forest and Paper Association, in 1999 the U.S. alone used 10 billion paper grocery bags—that's a lot of trees!

Instead of either paper or plastic bring your own **reusable bags**. These can be purchased either in stores or on line. Most grocery stores have them available near the check out counter.

Reusable bags are great for the environment, but take precautions so that they are safe for you and your family.

Reusable Grocery Bags - How Safe Are They?

You've purchased reusable grocery bags and take them faithfully when you go shopping. But if you are not careful, those environmentally-friendly reusable bags could make you and your family sick.

According to a Canadian study, reusable bags make a nice breeding ground for a variety of culprits like bacteria, yeast, mold and coliform (intestinal bacteria).

The study collected and tested 25 bags from people on the street.

The results showed that nearly two-thirds of them had some level of bacterial contamination on the surface and seams. Thirty percent of the bags had bacterial counts higher than the level allowed in safe drinking water. Five out of 25 bags tested positive for yeasts and 6 for molds.

What can be done to keep you and your family safe?



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Precautions to Take to Keep Bags Safe

Here's how to keep your reusable bags safe:

1. **Wash frequently.** The more times you use something without cleaning it, the more dirt and bacteria will collect on it. Bags can pick up contaminants both from what goes in them and from the environment (the ground, the back of your car, etc.). The best defense against cross-contamination is to wash your bags often, especially ones that have been carrying produce, meat and fish. Also, wash out bags that have been used for other purposes (like carrying non-food items) before you load them up with groceries.
2. **Double bag it.** Put meat, fruits and vegetables in thin clear plastic bags available in the produce section or at the meat counter. This offers an extra layer of protection to keep your reusable bags clean and also keeps foods from coming in contact with one another and preventing messy leaks.
3. **Pack right.** Keep your eye on how your groceries are packed. Fresh or frozen meat,

fish and poultry should never go in the same bag as your produce or ready-to-eat items. It's okay to ask the clerk to pack your meat separately, if they don't already know to do so.

4. **Keep it separate.** Set aside some reusable bags for different purposes. Use a select group for your groceries and keep others for non-food purposes (like carrying your shoes to work). Use a permanent marker to label bags to avoid any problems.

Are reusable bags one more thing to worry about? No, just be careful when handling food and remember to clean bags on a regular basis.



Keeping Summer Produce Safe

Most of us make sure to wash all fruits and vegetables before eating out of hand. But, all fruits and vegetables should be washed before consuming. This advice is often ignored when preparing melons. Though the outside is never eaten, bacteria on the rind can be transferred to the flesh of the fruit when cut open. And

remember once the melon is cut, it should be kept cool.

This is true of all fruits and vegetables. Tomatoes in particular, since they are often stored at room

temperature for best flavor. Once they have been sliced, make sure to treat them as you would any perishable foods.

Don't forget the two hour rule. Perishables can be kept out of the refrigerator or a cooler for no more than 2 hours, one hour if the temperature is over 90°. If food is out longer it is best to throw it away.



Wash all produce, including organic and farmers' market items, under running water. Soap, detergent or commercial produce washes are not recommended.