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Food Safety from the Farmers Market to your Fridge

Here are some tips and guidelines to help you make sure that your food is safe from the farmers market to your fridge.

If you've been watching the news or reading the paper, you are likely aware of the increasing number of food-borne illness outbreaks and the growing interest in food safety. *E. coli* 0157:H7, *Salmonella*, and *Listeria* outbreaks have been linked to fresh produce and meats. In response, consumers have started asking, "Where does our food come from?"

If your food comes from the farmers market, you may be getting to know some of the farmers who grow your food. Farmers who typically sell at farmers markets are small and medium-scale growers who use different production techniques than the large, industrial farms selling to supermarkets. The processing and distribution channels also differ. If you make a purchase from a farmer who grows everything he or she sells, you are minimizing the risk of contamination due to combining produce from many places and now have a good idea of where to trace that food back to.

Farmers markets are typically a mix of farmers who produce the food they sell, vendors who purchase



produce from another source and resell it, and vendors who process the product in some way and then sell it at the market. To learn more about the source of your food, simply ask the farmer or vendor where and how it was grown or produced.

Although getting to know the source of your food is a start, general food safety is much more involved

from the farm to your fork. This document is meant to help you, the farmers market shopper, ensure the safety of the food you purchase at the farmers market.

Looking for a great farmers market in your community? Visit www.mifma.org and use our "Find a Farmers Market" feature.

Choosing and Buying at the Farmers Market

Choosing the perfect item at the market can sometimes be a dilemma. Here are some tips:

- Look for fresh fruits and vegetables that are free from signs of spoilage. Common indicators of spoilage are unusual colors, mold, mildew or odors, but remember that sometimes specialty varieties look different than more familiar varieties.
- Handle produce gently to prevent bruising and damage. Bacteria can thrive in bruised areas. Be considerate of the vendor and other shoppers by gently handling the items that you decide not to purchase.
- Ask the farmer or vendor to help you make your selection. One of the best things about shopping at a farmers market is that you are purchasing directly from the farmer who grew the food you are about to purchase, an artisan who has baked or prepared the food, or a vendor who is an expert about their products. Don't be afraid to ask questions about where the produce is grown, how it is produced, or how to select the most suitable item for you.
- In many instances, farmers markets lack sinks and a water supply to wash fruits and vegetables. When sampling items, look for samples that appear to be clean, available as single servings with a toothpick or other utensil, and are covered. Those individuals serving the samples should be wearing disposable, single-use gloves and using clean serving utensils.
- Farmers and vendors often have bags to pack your selection for carrying. Another great option is to bring your own reusable basket or bag for shopping at the farmers market. Be sure to bag fresh fruits and vegetables separately from meat, poultry or fish.



Getting Your Purchase Home

We all know that some of the food you purchase will never make it home! Fresh berries and fruits are a great snack for the ride. Before popping that fresh treat into your mouth, make sure it has been thoroughly washed to remove any soil, bacteria, lingering pests, or traces of pesticides.

It is not wise to leave your farmers market purchases in the car for an extended period of time. Fresh fruits and vegetables typically decline in quality when in a hot car. Perishable items like eggs, poultry and meat can pose food safety problems if left unrefrigerated for too long.

The best option is to go home directly from the farmers market. If you can't go directly home, be prepared and pack a cooler with ice.



Storing Your Purchases

Hold off on washing. Wash produce immediately before using, not when you bring it home. Washing produce before storing can cause it to spoil faster.

Not all of the items you purchase at the farmers market have the same storage requirements. Some fruits and vegetables are best when stored at room temperature in a clean, dry place while others should be stored in a clean refrigerator at a temperature of 40 degrees Fahrenheit or below. If you are unsure of the temperature setting in your refrigerator, you can always check the temperature with a fridge thermometer.

Both fruits and vegetables store well in perforated plastic bags that help maintain moisture, but still allow ventilation. You can simply cut several small holes in a food-grade plastic bag to make your own perforated bag. Tightly sealing fresh produce in a plastic bag can promote the growth of mold and bacteria.

The crisper drawers at the bottom of your refrigerator are made specifically to store whole produce, usually with separate drawers to keep fruits apart from vegetables. Fruits release ethylene gas which may decrease the storage life of your vegetables while vegetables may produce odors that can be absorbed by fruits and affect their quality.

If the abundance of your farmers market purchase does not all fit into the crisper drawers, you can place fruits and vegetables on refrigerator shelves. Be sure to store meats on plates below produce to prevent liquid from the meats, which may contain harmful bacteria, from dripping onto the produce.

Refrigerate eggs and dairy products as soon as you get home. Meat, poultry and fish should be either refrigerated or frozen depending on your preparation plans.



Store at Room Temperature:

Melons
Nectarines
Onions
Peaches
Pears
Peppers
Plums
Potatoes
Sweet Potatoes
Tomatoes
Winter Squash

Refrigerate:

(Most other fruits and vegetables)

Beans
Berries
Broccoli
Cucumbers
Lettuces and Greens
Peas
Summer Squash

Where can I go to find out more about food safety at farmers markets?

Michigan Farmers Market Association, www.mifma.org

Michigan State University Extension, www.msue.anr.msu.edu

Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, www.michigan.gov/foodsafety

Cooking and Eating Your Farmers Market Items

The United States Department of Agriculture recommends four basic food safety steps:

1. CLEAN. Wash hands and surfaces often.

Hands should be washed before eating and drinking and anytime after handling animals, using the restroom, smoking, or if other contamination occurs. To properly wash your hands, wet with clean, warm water. Apply soap and rub until a lather forms. Wash hands for twenty seconds with warm water and soap before rinsing under clean running water. Dry hands with a paper or clean cloth towel.

Thoroughly wash raw fruits and vegetables under running water before eating to remove soil, bacteria, garden pests, and residual pesticides. A clean produce brush can be used to scrub firm produce. Cut away damaged or bruised areas and compost or discard any produce that looks rotten. Washing fruits and vegetables with soap or detergent is not recommended. Dry produce with a paper or clean cloth towel.

Clean dishes, knives, utensils, cutting boards and surfaces with hot water and soap or a sanitizing solution before preparing your farmers market foods and between the preparation of raw meats, poultry or fish and fruits and vegetables.



2. SEPARATE. Separate raw meat, poultry and egg products from cooked foods to avoid cross-contamination.

Cross-contamination is how bacteria spread and this can create food safety problems. Raw meat, poultry and fish and their juices should be kept apart from each other and other food items. Use one cutting board for meat, one for poultry or fish and another for fruits and vegetables.

3. COOK. Raw meat, poultry and egg products need to be cooked thoroughly.

Use a food thermometer to ensure foods have reached a temperature high enough to kill any harmful bacteria that may be present. Poultry should reach an



internal temperature of 165°F. Safe internal temperatures for cooking foods can be found at www.foodsafety.gov. If microwaving, stir and rotate the dish to prevent cold spots where harmful bacteria can survive.

4. CHILL. Store leftovers within two hours of cooking.

Bacteria spreads most quickly between the temperatures of 40°F and 140°F. Chilling food immediately after serving can be one of the most effective ways to reduce the risk of foodborne illnesses. Use a fridge thermometer to check that the temperature of your refrigerator is below 40°F. Chill leftovers within two hours of cooking. If it is warmer than 90°F outside, chill leftovers within an hour of cooking.