

Keep food safety in mind this memorial day weekend

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Even locally grown or organic fresh produce can become contaminated, experts warn.

(HealthDay) -- Picnics, parades and cookouts are as much a part of Memorial Day weekend as tributes to the United States' war veterans.

But, before tucking into that leafy, green salad or strawberry shortcake, remember that [fresh fruits and vegetables](#) can become contaminated with [harmful pathogens](#) that cause [food poisoning](#), such as *E. Coli*, *salmonella*, [listeria](#) and [norovirus](#), according to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. The contamination occurs during harvesting and can even affect fruits and vegetables grown locally or in a home garden, the group noted.

"One in six Americans gets sick every year from foodborne pathogens that you cannot see, smell or taste but are everywhere. Eating any contaminated product -- even produce labeled as organic or locally grown -- can lead to food poisoning or even death," Sarah Krieger, registered dietitian and academy spokeswoman, said in an academy news release. "Fruits and vegetables are an important part of a healthy eating plan, and should fill half of your plate, but just like any food product, extra precautions should be taken to reduce the risk of food poisoning."

To help ensure that Americans safely buy, store and prepare produce, the academy, in collaboration with ConAgra, offered the following tips:

- Avoid produce with mold, bruises or cuts that can harbor bacteria.
- Buy loose produce rather than pre-packaged.
- Wash and dry all fruits and vegetables (even pre-packaged produce) with cool [tap water](#) before preparing or eating.
- Use a knife to cut away any damaged areas on fruit or vegetables.

The experts added that when preparing fresh produce, it's important to avoid cross-contamination with other raw foods.

"Cross-contamination can lead to food poisoning when juices from raw foods like meat, poultry or chicken come in contact with ready-to-eat foods like raw produce," Krieger said. "Using two cutting boards and a color-code system can help: one color cutting board for raw meats; and the other for your fruits and vegetables."

The group also pointed out that cooked [fruits and vegetables](#) should be discarded after three to four days to avoid food poisoning. They advised people to label produce with an "eat by" date to ensure they know when food is no longer safe to eat.

More information:

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides more information on [foodborne illness in the United States](#).

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