

PENNY SAVER NEWS

FAX: 932-5261

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BY: Mary A. Keith, Ph.D., L.D.

Food, Nutrition and Health Agent

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY

5339 S. County Road 579

Seffner, FL 33584-3334

PH:(813)744-5519 x 136, FAX:744-5776

e-mail:makeith@ifas.ufl.edu

To Wash or Not to Wash

In the aftermath of the contaminated spinach situation there are now more products sailing the electronic waves, claiming to be the most effective thing around for removing bacteria, dust, mold, dirt, and anything else you might worry about from your produce. Some are spray on, some are soak, and some 'recipes' suggest soaking everything in bleach for half an hour. Some are made of oil from orange skins, some use bleach, vinegar or lemon juice. Which is best, and why?

Orange oil, or lemon or grapefruit oil, is extracted from the peel or seeds of the fruit. It's "all natural", and is a very effective degreaser. It will remove oil, grease, fat, wax, the build-up on the floor, and even the polish on your furniture if it's strong enough and you're not careful. It's part of the reason why we don't just bite into an orange the way we do an apple. It will remove some bacteria from the skin of fruits and vegetables. And it probably is effective at destroying some bacteria, since they have some fats in their cell wall.

Chlorine in any of several forms is a potent killer of bacteria. The most common form available to us as consumers is bleach. The active ingredient is sodium hypochlorite. If you want the most effective form, be sure to get a brand that has at least 5% active ingredient. Brands with less are usually less expensive, but they are also less effective. So you pay less but have to use more.

One story is that only a certain brand is effective at killing bacteria. As long as the bleach has the same amount of active ingredient, the name on the label will not

make a difference in how many bacteria it kills.

Another story says that only its formula will break down into water and salt. Any brand of sodium hypochlorite will become salt and water when it breaks down. The sodium and the chloride are the same whether they come from bleach or the salt shaker.

The chlorine/chlorite is the part that kills bacteria. However dirt, soil, even soap in the water will tie up the chlorine before it can do its killing. So for the bleach water to work, the produce has to be very clean. Or you have to add a lot more bleach to be sure there's enough left to work on the bacteria.

The recommended procedure is to soak the produce from 15 to 30 minutes in the bleach water, then soak again in fresh water to remove the bleach. By the end of all that soaking you'll have very soggy vegetables.

Vinegar or lemon juice are sometimes recommended, but they are not as effective unless the produce is soaked even longer. They also leave a disagreeable flavor on many foods.

Is it worth it? Unfortunately, all the research that has been done shows that just scrubbing the produce under running clean water takes off as many bacteria as the bleach water or the citrus oil. You might need to use a soft brush to get dirt out of the cracks or from under the leaves. But the scrubbing and rubbing is as effective as the chemicals. It also costs a lot less, and won't burn your skin or eyes the way strong bleach or citrus oil can.

Finally, if you open a bag of 'ready to eat' salad and decide to re-wash it yourself, you run the risk of adding contamination from the bowl, colander, sink or anything else that happens to touch the salad. At least with leafy greens such as lettuce and spinach

the bacteria hide inside the cut edges of the leaves, not on the outside. Washing is not very effective at getting them out.

If bagged greens say they are 'ready to eat', go ahead and eat them. Washing or rinsing them is not likely to make a difference in their quality. Do wash intact fruits and vegetables under clear running water. Wash your countertops, sinks, and all utensils with hot soapy water, rinse well, and if they came in contact with raw meat, follow up with a bleach rinse. Let it all air dry. But don't waste your hard-earned dollars on special 'wash' ingredients. The elbow grease to scrub produce costs a lot less and is just as effective.

Here's an interesting version of a Waldorf salad, higher in fiber and nutrients and lower in fat. And it's super quick too. Wash the produce under running water and start chopping. Enjoy!

Garden Waldorf Salad

3 cups broccoli florets

1 ½ cups cauliflower florets

1 cup coarsely grated carrots

1 cup chopped apples

½ cup chopped green onions

¼ cup chopped peanuts

1 cup vanilla nonfat yogurt

2 Tbsp lemon juice - optional

Toss all ingredients together in large bowl. Cover and chill for up to 6 hours.

Serves 4-6.

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