

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Are you one of the many who prefer their fresh fruit at room temperature? That's fine if you're biting into a whole, juicy, luscious fresh peach, or just peeling a banana. But if you're talking about fruit salad or slices of watermelon, for safety's sake, get used to cold fruit!

Yes, we used to leave the bowls of fruit and plates of watermelon or cantaloupe slices on the table most of the day. Maybe there'd be a cloth over them to keep the flies off, or maybe one of those domed screens. But no one thought anything of leaving the cut fruit out for hours. I guess we assumed that there was enough acid in it that no bacteria would grow.

Unfortunately, now we know better. There have been too many outbreaks of food poisoning (with some deaths) that have been traced to cut fruit. Yes, fruit has acid. But it also has lots of sugar, which bacteria love. So when fruit is cut and the sugary juice is exposed bacteria can grow.

How did bacteria get there? Some might have floated past on the breeze. But more likely they got spread across the surface by the knife that cut the fruit. Or they were put there by the fingers that carefully arranged the slices on the plate. It doesn't really matter how they arrived. Once they're there, they'll be quite happy to grow.

So, our job if we want to have our fruit, eat it, and not get sick too, is to keep them from growing. Luckily two of the basic four standards of safe food handling, Keep Food Clean and Keep Food Cold, will keep them under control.

Clean means not just our hands, the knife, spoon, counter and dish. It means washing the fruit as well. This is especially important for all types of melons. They grow on the ground, so they're in contact with the soil and whatever contamination might be in the soil. Smooth melons like watermelon and honeydew are easier to wash than rough-skinned cantaloupe. Use running tap water and a soft brush to scrub the skin before you cut into it. It's best to wash it just before you cut it, but if you're taking it to the beach or park where there might not be enough water, wash it before you leave. Dry the melon with a paper towel if you're not going to cut it up immediately.

It's a good idea to chill melons and other fruits before you cut them. If they're cold when they're cut there's even less time for bacteria to grow. But the most important thing to do is keep them cold once they're cut. That means keeping the bowl of fruit salad in the refrigerator until the last possible moment.

If you'll be out of the house for hours then plan ahead for enough ice to keep the fruit chilled. Designate one cooler for the fruit salad or slices and keep them in plastic bags on ice. A bowl big enough to fill with crushed ice plus the bowl of cut fruit can be a good substitute. A baking pan of crushed ice under a plate of sliced fruit will also work. If your home freezer is large enough, start a couple days in advance. Set the bowl for the fruit in a larger bowl. Fill the larger one with water. Put something in the smaller bowl to hold it down in the water, then freeze both of them. Now you have a complete coating of ice around the smaller bowl.

If none of these methods are possible or acceptable, then just cut the fruit as it will be eaten. Or take it out of the refrigerator or cooler just a little bit at a time. The important thing is that we need to keep cut fruit at or a little below 40°F to keep bacteria

from growing. No one wants to end a day at the beach or the family reunion with a bad case of food poisoning!

Here's a veggie variation on an old standard. It'll be a nice change of pace for dinner, cool and crisp. But it still has to be kept in the refrigerator. Stay safe this summer!

Veggie Waldorf Salad

3 Cups broccoli florets

1 ½ Cups sliced cauliflower

1 Cup grated carrots

1 Cup chopped apples

½ Cup chopped green onions

¼ Cup chopped peanuts

1 Cup vanilla non-fat yogurt (use Greek-style if you want a thicker dressing)

Toss vegetables and fruit in bowl to combine. Add yogurt and peanuts and stir gently until coated. Cover and chill for up to 6 hours. Serves 4.