

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:mkeith@ufl.edu**Safer Lettuce and Spinach**

In the coming year we might have much safer spinach and lettuce on the grocery produce counter thanks to the FDA's recent approval of another method for sanitizing or 'pasteurizing' these products. After over 5 years of study, FDA approved the use of radiation to kill dangerous bacteria on these two products. The final steps of the legal processes are happening now. Then food processors who choose to use this method will have to prepare the equipment and change the labels on their products before they can actually start selling any. But eventually we should be able to buy irradiated lettuce or spinach and not have to worry about whether there are any Salmonella or E. coli hiding there to make us sick.

Research on using irradiation to kill bacteria has been going on for over 60 years. Five years ago FDA received a request to allow this process on lettuce and spinach. Since then we've had outbreaks of illness from spinach, green onions, peppers, various berries and lots of other foods, as well as the scare over tomatoes. Many people got very sick, some people died from the bacteria on them. The only foods that the new approval covers are fresh loose or bagged spinach and iceberg lettuce.

Leafy greens are some of the hardest vegetables to get the bacteria out of. The plants grow very close to the ground, with lots of opportunity for bacteria to get on them from dirt or water. The leaves are crinkled and curved, with plenty of places to hide bacteria. And when the leaves are cut from the stem, bacteria can slide up into the cuts

where wash water won't take them out. Plus, we eat these raw, so there's no chance for cooking to kill the bacteria. How can we be safe?

Irradiation rays can get into the nooks and crannies, into the cut stems, and kill the bacteria. The power of the rays is very low, low enough that only the bacteria are killed. The lettuce and spinach are not wilted or cooked.

FDA has reviewed thousands of studies on the effects of irradiation on leafy greens and other foods. They are confident that the amount of radiation permitted will not be enough to make any difference in the nutritional value of these vegetables. Vitamin A is one vitamin that is sensitive to irradiation. Spinach is a good source of vitamin A. But it doesn't have real vitamin A, only the beta carotene that we use to make vitamin A. And beta carotene is not affected by irradiation. So the full nutritional value will still be there for us. Other vitamins are not affected either.

FDA is not saying that lettuce and spinach will not have any bacteria. In fact, many of the bacteria that spoil food, make it look or smell bad, will still be there. Irradiation doesn't kill them as fast as it does the ones that make us sick. Irradiated food will still spoil, it just won't be nearly as dangerous before or when it does.

Irradiation does not remove dirt. Unless the package says 'pre-washed', we will still have to wash the lettuce and spinach.

Every package of irradiated lettuce or spinach will have to say "Treated with radiation." or "Treated by irradiation." on the label. The radura design must also be on the label. You will be able to recognize the irradiated packages and choose whether you want to buy them or not. You won't see the difference, but the irradiated ones will have a lot fewer bacteria hiding in them.

Here's a spinach salad with an unusual combination of flavors and a lovely combo of colors. With the little 'personal' watermelons on the market these days you won't have to worry about eating the rest of it for a week to come. One mini-melon should be just about right. Enjoy in good health!

Red and Green Salad

1 bag fresh spinach, ready to eat	3 cups cubed seeded watermelon
1 cup sliced fresh mushrooms	1 slice turkey bacon, crisp-cooked
1/3 cup red wine vinegar	1/4 cup no-cal sugar equivalent
1/4 cup chopped onion	1 tsp Worcestershire sauce
3 Tbsp canola or olive oil	1/2 tsp salt

Toss spinach, watermelon and mushrooms together in large bowl. Crumble bacon on top and mix. Combine rest of ingredients in food processor and process until blended. Just before serving toss salad with 1/3 cup of dressing. Use rest of dressing on another salad. Serves 6.

Here is the radura logo
that must be on all irradiated
foods packages or labels.



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