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Food safety tips for fresh herbs

Fresh herbs are often used to season and flavour dishes. While they can be purchased at most grocery stores and farmers' markets, many Canadians plant herb gardens in their own backyard.

Popular types of fresh herbs include rosemary, oregano, basil, and thyme. Fresh herbs not only enhance the flavour of your favourite dishes, but may also help reduce the risk of heart disease.

By making sure they are properly handled, washed, prepared, and stored, you can enjoy the health benefits of fresh herbs and help prevent food poisoning for yourself and your family.



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Fresh herbs and food poisoning

While fresh herbs do not naturally contain bacteria that can make you ill, they can become contaminated because they are grown close to the ground.

Eating fresh herbs that have been contaminated with harmful bacteria can make you sick. Contaminated herbs have been linked to incidents of food poisoning caused by *Cyclospora* and *E. Coli*.

Fresh herbs can become contaminated in the field by:

- soil
- contaminated water
- animals
- improperly composted manure

They can also be contaminated by bacteria:

- during and after harvest from handling, storing, and transporting
- at the grocery store, in the refrigerator, or from counters and cutting boards (through cross-contamination with harmful bacteria from raw meat, poultry, or seafood)

Choosing herbs

- Pick herbs that have bright leaves and a fresh smell. Stalks should be crisp and the leaves should not be dried out.
- Avoid leaves that are yellow or brown or have black spots.

Chilling/storing

- Fresh herbs should be stored unwashed in the refrigerator. Trim the ends of the stalks and put them into a re-sealable plastic bag. Store the herbs in the crisper or vegetable bin of your refrigerator for up to five days.

- Fresh herbs can also be frozen after they've been washed and patted dry with paper towels. Store in freezer bags.
- Basil should be stored unwashed, uncovered, and unrefrigerated. Refrigerating it may cause the basil leaves to turn black. It is the only herb that should be stored this way.

Cleaning

Washing your hands and following proper cleaning techniques can help you avoid cross-contamination and prevent the spread of food poisoning.

- Use warm water and soap to thoroughly wash all utensils, countertops, and cutting boards before and after handling fresh herbs.

Preparing

Wash your hands thoroughly with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds, before and after handling fresh herbs.

- Throw out any leaves that are yellowing or have black spots.
- Rinse fresh herbs under fresh, cool running water. There is no need to use anything other than water to wash herbs. Washing them gently with water is as effective as using produce cleansers.
- Don't soak fresh herbs in a sink full of water. They can become contaminated by bacteria in the sink.

Did you know?

Every year, more than 4 million Canadians get food poisoning. Many of these illnesses could be prevented by following proper food handling and preparation techniques.

What the Government of Canada does to protect you

The Government of Canada is committed to food safety.

Together with industry, we work to identify best practices that can be used to help prevent contamination of fresh produce throughout the food system, from the field to the store. In addition, inspection and enforcement activities conducted by the [Canadian Food Inspection Agency](#) work to ensure that steps taken by producers, manufacturers, and importers have been effective and that the foods available to Canadians are safe.

For more information

- [Food recalls and advisories](#)
- [Report product-related health and safety concerns](#)
- [Be Food Safe](#)
- [Canadian Food Inspection Agency](#)

[For industry and professionals](#)

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