

A Retail and Food Service Operator's Guide to Washing Ready-to-eat Lettuce and Leafy Green Salads Script

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Slide 1: What is a ready-to-eat lettuce/leafy green salad? Ready-to-eat salad is a prepackaged, pre-cut salad that is meant for direct consumer consumption without any further prep work. This means that the salad can go straight from the bag to your plate and then to your mouth without any other handling. Iceberg lettuce, romaine lettuce, green leaf lettuce, red leaf lettuce, butter lettuce, baby leaf lettuce, escarole, endive, spring mix and spinach are all examples of ready-to-eat lettuce/leafy green salad.

Slide 4: Health and convenience are the two factors consumers consider most when shopping. These factors have caused the popularity of ready-to-eat salads to grow exponentially over the last couple of years. Ready-to-eat salads are used in homes, restaurants, and stores, and have become a 2.7 billion dollar business.

Slide 5: Well, why should my establishment use ready-to-eat food products? Two reasons: they are convenient and they reduce the risk of cross-contamination.

Slide 6: Cross-contamination occurs when a pathogen or microbe is transferred from one food to another. For example, if raw meat is contaminated with *E. coli* and the juices drip onto your salad, your salad may then become contaminated with *E. coli*. Since you do not usually cook salad before you consume it, you can then become infected by the *E. coli* on your salad. This could make you very ill. If this happens to a group of consumers in your place of business, it can become costly for your establishment. It will also put your reputation at risk. The key is to prevent cross-contamination. You should be especially careful if you have a large clientele of children, elderly people, or people with weakened immune systems. These population groups are at an increased risk of developing illnesses after consumption of contaminated food products.

Slide 7: With all of the recent cases of salad contamination, you may be wondering if your establishment needs to wash the produce before it is prepared and distributed to the consumers. The best way to determine whether to wash or not is to read the food labels on the package. If the product is a raw agricultural commodity, it will need to be washed. If the product is a ready-to-eat salad, then washing is not necessary.

Slide 9: Raw agricultural commodities are produce that are still in their intact form and that have not been peeled, cut, or altered in any way. Although this produce may have been treated chemically or washed, its overall appearance would not be any different than

it was when it was picked on the farm. This kind of produce should be washed carefully before consumption.

Slide 10: If your salad is a pre-washed bagged salad that has been kept refrigerated and is being used before the use-by date, then, under normal circumstances, you do NOT have to wash your salad. If your salad meets these criteria but has been previously opened and used, then you MUST wash the salad before you use it again. An open bag makes it easy for the produce to become contaminated by drips and spills from products that are stored around it. Microbes also bind to cut surfaces better than they bind to uncut surfaces. This is a potential problem, since most ready-to-eat salads consist of cut leaf pieces. Washing the salad will help to reduce your risk of contaminating the greens and infecting your customers.

Slide 11: All ready-to-eat salad products that are labeled *washed*, *triple-washed*, or *ready-to-eat* go through the same washing process. This is a three-step process that includes washing the produce in fresh water to remove debris, followed by multiple thorough chlorinated baths. This process results in a cleaner bagged salad than simply rinsing the salad under tap water as you would at your place of business.

Slide 12: You might be wondering if it is better just to rewash all salad, even if it is a ready-to-eat salad. Washing the ready-to-eat salad actually may be more harmful than helpful. Most bacteria on the salad will be removed during the vigorous washing techniques that are performed in the factories that package ready-to-eat salads. The salads are washed in a very sanitary environment that is much cleaner than your average restaurant kitchen. Any bacteria that are resistant to the cleansers at the packaging site are likely to be resistant to your rinsing as well. Also, if you do not wash the salad correctly, you increase the risk for cross-contamination of the salad. Once the salad is contaminated, it is very difficult to remove or kill the pathogens.

Slide 13: If you do choose to wash your salads, there are five important rules you should follow.

Slide 14: The first rule is to practice good hand washing procedures. Hand washing is extremely important, because the two pathogens most commonly found on produce are *E. coli* and *Salmonella*. Both of these bacteria are spread by fecal matter somehow getting on the produce. Consumers then ingest the contaminated food product. Fecal matter can get on produce via soil, water, animals, and human contact. By utilizing proper hand washing techniques, you can partially eliminate contamination by these two pathogens.

Slide 15: The best way to wash your hands is with soap and water. According to the FDA and CDC, you should use regular soap and water to wash your hands instead of alcohols. Studies have shown that bacterial spores, protozoan oocysts (a form of parasite), and certain nonenveloped viruses are resistant to the alcohols and are better removed by washing with soap and water for 20 seconds.

Slide 16: Second, you should always wash and prepare your produce in an area that is separated from potential high-risk food items, such as raw meat, raw poultry, and raw seafood. This will help to reduce contact between the food items and decrease the risk for cross-contamination.

Slide 17: Rule three: When you are cleaning the sink and other food preparation materials, make sure you follow the next four steps in the process. The first step is to wash the sink and other food preparation utensils with warm soapy water. Next, you must thoroughly rinse the sink and utensils. This should be followed by sanitizing with the sanitizer your establishment uses. Finally, you need to let the equipment air dry completely before use.

Slide 18: Rule four: It is important to thoroughly rinse the salad in cold running water. You want to make sure that the water is running in order to decrease the risk of contamination by dirty water.

Slide 19: Rule five: Lettuce is usually re-crisped by placing the cut lettuce/leafy greens into containers with tap water. If you add additional lettuce/leafy greens to the re-crisping container after it has already been used, you will increase the risk for cross-contamination. Use running water, not soaking, to re-crisp your lettuce.

Slide 20: Here are some other tips to help prevent food-borne illnesses.

Slide 21: You should try not to handle ready-to-eat foods with your bare hands, especially if the food is not going to be cooked before consumption. In order to prevent touching the food with your hands, you can use utensils, gloves, or, preferably, BOTH!

Slide 22: Keep in mind that gloves and utensils are not substitutes for proper hand washing. Make sure that you use these items in ADDITION to regular hand washing.

Slide 23: Refrigeration slows the rate of bacterial growth. Fresh-cut vegetables should not sit at room temperature for more than two hours. Instead, the produce should be kept either refrigerated or on ice at a temperature of 40°F or below. Displayed produce should be kept at this temperature as well. Refrigerators and display containers should be checked periodically with a thermometer that is meant for this purpose.

Slide 24: It is important to check your produce when you receive it in order to make sure it is not damaged.

Slide 25: The first thing you should do when receiving a batch of produce is to inspect the new arrival. If the product looks tampered with or mishandled, you need to reject the produce. These products could be harmful.

Slide 26: When you are receiving the produce it is important to look at the containers that it comes in. If the container is dirty, wet, open, or crushed, reject the produce. Make

sure you use good judgment when you are evaluating the state of the produce. The following slides will show you some examples of containers that you would not want to accept.

Slide 31: It is important to separate ready-to-eat salads from other items in your refrigerator. In order to prevent cross-contamination, do not store raw meats, poultry, or fish on shelves above raw produce. If you store these items above produce, they may be knocked over and fall into the ready-to-eat salad, or their juices may drip on the salad. Either of these scenarios increases the risk of contamination.

Slide 32: The last thing you need to look out for is spoilage. Decay in lettuce or leafy greens may be caused by plant pathogens. These pathogens often coexist with human pathogens that can cause food-borne illnesses. It is important not to use any item that looks like it is spoiled. You should also pay close attention to the use-by date. Use-by dates are different from purchase-by dates. A use-by date is the date the manufacturer recommends a product should be consumed by to avoid spoilage. The use-by date is usually after the purchase-by date. You can use the product after the purchase-by date; however, you should NOT use the product after the use-by date.