

## ***Sprouts: What You and Your Customers Should Know***

Edible sprouts such as alfalfa, broccoli, mung bean, and radish sprouts, are excellent sources of antioxidants, essential amino acids, and a handful of nourishing vitamins and minerals.

However, like any fresh produce that is consumed raw or lightly cooked, sprouts that are served on salads, wraps, sandwiches, and in some Asian food, may contain bacteria that can cause foodborne illness. But unlike other fresh produce, sprouts are grown from seeds and beans under warm and humid conditions. These conditions are also ideal



for the growth of bacteria, including *Salmonella*, *Listeria*, and *E. coli*. If just a few harmful bacteria are present in or on the seed, the bacteria can grow to high levels during sprouting, even if you are growing your own sprouts under sanitary conditions at home. Raw or lightly cooked sprouts have been implicated in over 30 reported foodborne outbreaks within the United States since 1996. The majority of these outbreaks were caused by *Salmonella* and *E. coli*.

Children, older adults, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems (such as transplant patients and individuals with HIV/AIDS, cancer, and diabetes) should avoid eating raw or lightly cooked sprouts of any kind (including onion, alfalfa, clover, radish, and mung bean sprouts).

### **What can retailers do to reduce the risk of illness?**

- Make sure that your suppliers are on board with sprout safety. If obtaining sprouts directly, you should know all of the sprouters' information and their food safety information. Specifically ask how they reduce the food safety risk in their seed stock, during storage, treatment, germination and post-harvest activities. If you use a distributor, make sure that your distributor has food safety controls in place to vet the sprouter, maintain temperature control, as well as protect from contamination during shipment.
- Store/display at 41°/5°C or less
- Protect sprouts from contamination.
- Physically examine sprouts at receiving. The sprout roots should be clean, buds should not be dark color or have a musty smell, and sprouts should not have a slimy appearance. Sprouts should smell fresh and clean.
- If using them in other products, rinse in potable water and use gloves when handling sprouts
- Evaluate your product and sales mix. When doing this, some retailers have determined that selling Raw Sprouts aren't worth the risk/expense when compared to sales opportunities. Shelf space was better utilized for other products.

**What can consumers do to reduce the risk of illness if they want to eat sprouts?**

- Wash sprouts thoroughly under running water before eating or cooking. Washing may reduce bacteria that may be present, but it will not eliminate it.
- Cook sprouts thoroughly. Cooking kills harmful bacteria and reduces the risk of illness.
- Physically examine sprouts before purchasing. The sprout roots should be clean, buds should not be dark color or have a musty smell, and sprouts should not have a slimy appearance. Sprouts should smell fresh and clean.

Information: FDA, FoodSafety.gov., Pennsylvania Dept of Ag., Colorado State University