

Are You Still Buying Precut Fruit?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Precut fruit offers convenience but increases the risk of foodborne illness due to processing contamination and loss of protective skin. A 2023 salmonella outbreak linked to precut cantaloupe affected 407 people across 44 states
- › Precut fruit is more expensive, often treated with chemical preservatives to maintain appearance, and packaged in plastic, potentially exposing consumers to harmful substances like bisphenol A
- › Whole, fresh fruit, preferably organic, retains more nutrients and reduces exposure to pesticides. Organic produce has been linked to better nutritional composition and lower body mass index
- › To find chemical-free produce, visit farmers markets, join community-supported agriculture programs or grow your own food. The "Dirty Dozen" list can guide conventional produce purchases
- › Washing produce under running water can remove up to 77% of pesticides. Purchasing organic produce further reduces pesticide exposure, as it has four times lower detectable residue

Precut fruit is a rapidly growing segment among consumers, as the convenience lessens the prep time involved. It also helps save space, especially for people with small kitchens. On the business side, grocery store owners can increase their profit margins because there's less produce wasted from their inventory.¹

While this trend seems like a huge win for consumers, a closer look reveals that this is not the case. The precut fruit you're buying may even put you in harm's way because it increases the risk of exposure to foodborne pathogens, chemical additives and plastics.

Four Reasons to Avoid Precut Fruit

While the convenience cannot be disregarded, buying precut fruit regularly may actually be harmful for you. The Hearty Soul provides four downsides of precut fruit, and why changing this habit can lead to better health:²

- **Increased risk of foodborne illness** — There are two reasons why precut fruit can increase your risk of developing a foodborne illness — the cleanliness of the processing plant and the actual fruit itself. According to Vermont state's Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets:³

"Bacteria need nutrients, moisture and the right temperatures to grow and divide. Salmonella bacteria can attach to crop surfaces and be transported through plant tissues. When the tissue of produce is cut or damaged, sugars can be released, providing a nutrient source for any pathogenic or spoilage bacteria present on the surface to multiply.

In areas and equipment used for handling produce, spaces where water and organic debris collect are important to clean regularly to avoid allowing these 'harborage points' to become environments where bacteria can thrive."

During the last quarter of 2023, the U.S Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) investigated a salmonella outbreak linked to precut cantaloupe.

According to their report, 407 cases across 44 states occurred, causing 158 hospitalizations and six deaths.⁴ This is not the only time precut fruit was linked to an outbreak of foodborne disease. A similar case happened in 2018, which, again, involved cantaloupe.⁵

In the report, Keith Warriner, Ph.D., a food science professor at the University of Guelph,⁶ explained the importance of the fruit's skin in protecting against bacteria. Since cantaloupes are grown in the ground, their skins are exposed to various pathogens. Once the fruits are processed, bacteria can easily transfer to the flesh. "Melons, in particular, are an extreme example because their flesh is the best growth medium for salmonella," he says.

- **Higher price** — Precut fruit transfers the labor of food prep from the consumer to the retailer. Therefore, expect to pay higher prices for it. In a report⁷ from HuffPost, they noted that pre-cut produce can be three times more expensive than buying whole produce.

In other words, the only advantage of pre-cut fruit is the time you save in the kitchen; however, the tradeoff is an increased risk of foodborne disease. Plus, the fruit isn't as fresh anymore.

- **Cleaned with chemicals** — Have you ever cut an apple, only to notice that the flesh has browned after a few minutes?

That's because once the flesh is exposed to oxygen, the polyphenols in the fruit convert into melanin, an iron-containing substance that creates the brown color.⁸ While browned flesh of fruits are safe to eat,⁹ it's not an appetizing appearance. Hence, groceries that pre-cut their fruit apply chemical preservatives to keep them looking fresh.

When you buy pre-cut fruit, you're likely eating these chemicals, too. In a 2022 study,¹⁰ researchers noted that chlorine is a commonly used sanitizer during the processing of pre-cut fruit. However, this can react with the fruit and possibly produce carcinogens, which is why most European countries banned this practice.

While other alternative preservation methods, such as citric acid, are explored, they are still not enough to eliminate microbes, researchers say.¹¹

- **Increased plastic exposure** — Plastic is extensively used in food packaging, which can leach into the product. According to research conducted by Consumer Reports,¹² bisphenol A (BPA) was in 79% of the 85 samples they tested, which included fruits, vegetables, milk, seafood, baby food and more.

BPA is a well-known endocrine disruptor commonly used in plastics.¹³ While the tests conducted by Consumer Reports didn't exceed thresholds set by U.S. and European standards, it isn't an indication of safety. According to lead scientist Tunde Akinleye, "We don't feel comfortable saying these levels are okay. They're not."¹⁴ To reduce your exposure to plastic, consider implementing these strategies:

Purchase products sold in glass containers whenever possible	Look for plastic-free alternatives to common items such as toys and toothbrushes
Choose reusable products over single-use plastics. These include razors, washable feminine hygiene products, glass bottles, cloth grocery bags and handkerchiefs	Use glass containers for leftovers, and bring them with you whenever you're going out
Bring your own silverware when buying take-out	Bring your own refillable water bottle instead of purchasing bottled water

Eating Organic, Unprocessed Fruit Is the Best Approach

Another notable downside to precut fruit is the loss of nutrition. According to Caroline West Passerello, spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, "Cutting fruits or vegetables exposes them to oxygen and light, and sometimes heat, all of which affect vitamin retention in food."¹⁵

This is especially the case for water-soluble vitamins, such as B-vitamins and vitamin C, as they may evaporate faster after fruit is cut. Passerello says that fresh, whole fruits

retain their nutrients longer. If you have leftovers, keep them in airtight containers to preserve their freshness.¹⁶

If your budget permits, choose whole, fresh organic fruit. According to a 2024 analysis published in the *Foods* journal,¹⁷ organic produce is superior to conventionally grown food as it contains higher quantities of essential nutrients, such as vitamin C, iron and magnesium. Levels of detectable pesticide residue in organic produce is four times lower than conventional varieties and it also has lower levels of cadmium, a heavy metal that can damage kidneys and liver.¹⁸

Moreover, the researchers noted that eating organic food has been linked to better blood nutritional composition, lower pesticide exposure and reduced body mass index (BMI).

Know Your Labels

While there are certain upsides to going organic, be aware that there are different classifications. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), there are four types consumers must be familiar with:¹⁹

- **100% Organic** — Food that qualifies as 100% organic must be made with 100% certified organic ingredients and may use the USDA organic seal or the 100% organic claim
- **Organic** — The term "organic" identifies a product or ingredients that must be certified organic except where nonorganic ingredients are allowed that are specified on the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances. These must constitute no more than 5% of the combined total ingredients. An organic certification means that 95% is certified organic
- **"Made with" organic ingredients** — Products must have at least 70% of the product made with certified organic ingredients. The organic seal cannot be used, and the final product cannot be represented as organic
- **Specific organic ingredients** — Multi-ingredient products that have less than 70% certified organic content cannot display the organic seal or use the word "organic."

However, they can list certified organic ingredients on the ingredient list

Understanding the labels is not enough. If you're set on adding organic food into your diet, it's important to be a scrupulous consumer. As more people are moving away from conventionally grown produce, many devious companies are labeling their conventionally grown products as "organic" to boost profit. So, be sure to thoroughly review where your organic products came from.

According to The Organic & Non-GMO Report,²⁰ one farmer was arrested on fraud charges in 2020. He sold conventional grain labeled as "organic," allowing him to amass around \$71 million in profit before being caught by authorities. In early 2023, two other farmers were also caught doing a similar scheme.

How to Find Organic, Chemical-Free Produce

The best way to find organic, chemical-free produce is to visit the farmers themselves. Stop by your local farmers markets and strike up a conversation with the vendors there. These small-scale operations likely use sustainable farming practices and do their best to minimize chemical inputs in their product.

Familiarize yourself with common agricultural vocabulary and talk to the farmers to get an idea about their growing practices. While not all vendors at farmers markets may sell certified organic products, many follow sustainable agricultural practices, which is still far better than conventionally grown produce.

In addition to visiting farmers markets, I recommend joining a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program. It's a subscription-based model that allows you to receive regular deliveries of fresh produce directly from a group of local farms.²¹ Many CSA farmers prioritize sustainable and organic agriculture, providing consumers with access to high-quality, minimally processed produce.

Some CSA farmers even provide educational programs that can enhance consumers' knowledge about sustainable agriculture.²² If you're not able to join a CSA, you can use the Environmental Working Group's "Dirty Dozen" list as a guide when buying produce.²³

It highlights 12 fruits and vegetables most contaminated with pesticides. This list is updated regularly, so check back often to see if there are any changes.

Another great way of getting access to chemical-free produce is growing your own food using sustainable practices. By controlling the growing environment and avoiding synthetic chemicals, you can ensure that your produce is as pure as possible.

Wash Your Produce to Reduce Your Risk of Diseases

It would be wise to wash fresh produce – conventional or organic – to help remove dirt, residues and other contaminants. But what is the best way to wash them? A 2022²⁴ study published in *Foods* sought to answer this question.

The research team selected five different leafy vegetables and coated them with commonly used pesticides, such as indoxacarb, fludioxonil and chlorfenapyr. Then, the samples were cleaned using five methods:

- Running tap water
- Stagnant tap water/alkaline water
- Ultrasonic cleaning
- 5% vinegar, 2% sodium bicarbonate and vegetable detergent in water
- Blanching/boiling

Results showed that running water had the best results, reducing around 77% of the pesticides in the test samples. Boiling/blanching was the second best, reducing 59.5% of the pesticides. Moreover, a combination of running water and boiling can help maximize pesticide removal. While it's highly doubtful that you'll be boiling fruit, this information can certainly help when it comes to cleaning your vegetables.

Where to Find High-Quality, Organic Produce

If you live in a dense, urban location in the U.S. that doesn't have any local farmers markets, don't worry. There are plenty of ways to connect with reputable organic farmers that employ regenerative agricultural practices so you can still purchase their products. Below is a list of websites I recommend:

[American Grassfed Association](#) – The goal of the American Grassfed Association (AGA) is to promote the grass fed industry through government relations, research, concept marketing and public education.

Their website also allows you to search for AGA-approved producers certified according to strict standards that include being raised on a diet of 100% forage; raised on pasture and never confined to a feedlot; never treated with antibiotics or hormones; born and raised on American family farms.

[EatWild.com](#) – EatWild.com provides lists of farmers known to produce raw dairy products as well as grass fed beef and other farm-fresh produce (although not all are certified organic). Here you can also find information about local farmers markets, as well as local stores and restaurants that sell grass fed products.

[Weston A. Price Foundation](#) – Weston A. Price has local chapters in most states, and many of them are connected with buying clubs in which you can easily purchase organic foods, including grass fed raw dairy products like milk and butter.

[Grassfed Exchange](#) – The Grassfed Exchange has a listing of producers selling organic and grass fed meats across the U.S.

[Local Harvest](#) – This website will help you find farmers markets, family farms and other sources of sustainably grown food in your area where you can buy produce, grass fed meats and many other goodies.

[Farmers Markets](#) – A national listing of farmers markets.

[Eat Well Guide: Wholesome Food from Healthy Animals](#) – The Eat Well Guide is a free online directory of sustainably raised meat, poultry, dairy and eggs from farms, stores,

restaurants, inns, hotels and online outlets in the U.S and Canada.

Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) – CISA is dedicated to sustaining agriculture and promoting the products of small farms.

The Cornucopia Institute – The Cornucopia Institute maintains web-based tools rating all certified organic brands of eggs, dairy products and other commodities, based on their ethical sourcing and authentic farming practices separating CAFO (concentrated animal feeding operation) "organic" production from authentic organic practices.

RealMilk.com – If you're still unsure of where to find raw milk, check out Raw-Milk-Facts.com and RealMilk.com. They can tell you what the status is for legality in your state, and provide a listing of raw dairy farms in your area. The Farm to Consumer Legal Defense Fund also provides a state-by-state review of raw milk laws.²⁵ California residents can also find raw milk retailers using the store locator available at RAW FARM.²⁶

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