Tuesday Minute Transcript

This Week's Topic

Grocery Store Bagged Salad Greens... Contain Bacteria

"Consumers Union found 39% of bagged salad greens contained bacteria."

Just yesterday my wife was saying how she liked using the triple washed greens because all you have to do is open the bag and pour it in the bowl and add other veggies. Viola, you can have a great salad in minutes. Well that may not be such a good idea.

A Consumers Union from Yonkers, New York released a study February 2, 2010 showing that bagged salad greens contain bacteria that may be unacceptable. The results of the test bear good and bad news for salad lovers.

First, the good news: A Test of 208 packages of salad greens found no evidence of three pathogenic bacteria, a strain of E. coli called O157:H7, Salmonella, and Listeria. These are the pathogenic bacteria that, when present in food, have made people sick and, in some cases, caused death.

However, here's the bad news. Consumers Union did find other bacteria, called "indicator organisms" namely a type of generic E. coli, Enterococcus, total and fecal coliforms. These organisms are routinely found in the digestive tract of humans, other animals, and the environment.

Public health officials say their presence indicate inadequate sanitation, fecal contamination, and the potential for the presence of pathogenic bacteria. Levels of these organisms are often used as an indirect measure of the potential for dangerous fecal pathogens to be present.

Whether the greens were organic, came in a package or a bag, or included "baby greens" made no statistically significant difference in the results. However, the packages with the higher bacteria levels did have a few similarities: Many contained spinach, and many were within one to five days from the "use-by" date. By contrast, packag-

es six to eight days from their "use-by" date fared better.

The FDA which has authority over the safety of all produce items currently does not have any standards or bacterial limits on vegetables. There is proposed legislation which will force bacterial limits on green leafy vegetables, particularly bagged salads. For example, a company will have to create lot numbers and have additional regulations to track what produce goes where. They will have to perform tests to make sure the food they ship is not contaminated.

When I hear the debate already brewing, I am reminded of the story of the NASA team that spent millions of dollars to create a pen that would write in the antigravity atmosphere of outer space; whereas, the Russians decided to use a pencil. Let's talk about a "pencil" type approach that we can do today that will make the vegetables we purchase safe and actually taste better.

About 15 years ago a colleague of mine shared with me how he washed his vegetables in a bleach bath solution which significantly increased the taste, appearance, and texture of the food. He learned about the technique from a Naturopath, Dr. Parcells, who lived to be 106. Dr. Parcells claimed the technique reduced pesticides and herbicides that are used in commercial farming.

My colleague and I have both been against the use of any chlorine as it can displace iodine. However, one of his students decided to do a little experiment that convinced both of us. His student, a wise woman, took several peaches and removed their skins and labeled half of them something like "peach skins group a." She then took the remaining skins and soaked them for 10 minutes in the bleach bath. She labeled them something like "peach skins b." Remember these were the same peaches, the only difference was that one group of skins was soaked in bleach water for 10 minutes.

She sent both batches of peach skins to a lab and had them look for mercury which was used at the time as a base in common commercial pesticides. The people at the lab thought it was a cute idea promoted by some health nuts but quickly changed their demeanor after the Clorox bath consistently removed 70% to 75% of the mercury.

After hearing these results, my wife and I soaked our vegetables in this solution for years. More recently we've relied on organic or pre-washed vegetables, but I can guarantee that we will start soaking again after reading this report.

Here's how to use the bleach bath: ½ teaspoon of old fashion Clorox bleach to one gallon of tap water. If your sink holds 6 gallons of water, take 3 teaspoons of Clorox bleach and fill up the sink and soak for 10-20 minutes. Here is the important part. After you soak your vegetables drain the water, rinse the vegetables and the sink, then fill it up again with clean water. Soak for another 10 minutes. At low levels bleach is benign and with rinsing there is no need for concern. You will be surprised at how fresh your vegetables look, how much longer they stay crisp, and how much better they taste.

Print out instructions for the bleach bath and a letter my colleague used to defend his use of chlorine. You'll be impressed. Try it yourself and feel free to share it with your patients.

Thanks for reading this week's edition. I'll see you again next Tuesday.