FOOD SAFETY AND FARMER'S MARKETS*
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Shopping at the farmers market not only offers some of the freshest fruits, vegetables and other foods you can find, it also offers the opportunity to buy locally, support small farms and businesses in your area and connect with your community. There are several thousand farmers markets operating in the United States with more opening every year. Farmers markets offer unique local products you often can't find elsewhere, including local varieties of vegetables and fruits, artisan cheeses, fresh potted herbs, homemade sauces, oven-fresh baked goods, and locally produced poultry, eggs and meat.

As you explore farmers markets in your area, be mindful of food safety. Vendors often sell their products outdoors where they are exposed to contaminants such as dirt, bugs and pollutants. In addition, the market sites often have little access to water for hand and product washing, and electricity for refrigerating. This does not mean you should avoid farmers markets, just be mindful. Most markets have their own food safety rules that vendors must comply with, as well as related government regulations. But, there are also basic guidelines you should follow to ensure the farm-fresh food is safe.

- Pay attention to the vendors' food safety practices as you shop.
- Check the stands overall cleanliness including gloves and clean utensils for food handling, covered garbage cans, coolers for perishables and clean bags.
- Take time to talk to and learn from vendors. Many small farmers are eager to talk about their growing methods and how they store and prepare produce and care for their animals. They may even invite you for a farm visit.

Follow these guidelines to reduce the risk of bringing home a case of food poisoning.

Fruits and Vegetables

Harmful foodborne pathogens like *E. Coli, Salmonella, Listeria* and norovirus may contaminate fruits and vegetables from the soil or water or during harvesting. Home grown, store purchased, organic or non-organically grown produce all have some bacteria. Fortunately, there are ways to reduce your risk:

- Go early for the best selections.
- Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly under running water before eating, cutting or cooking. Dry with a clean cloth or paper towel to eliminate bacteria.
- Wash produce even if you plan to peel it before eating. Bacteria present on the outside of foods like melons and bananas can be transferred to the inside when you cut or peel them.
- Be sure to refrigerate cut or peeled fruits and vegetables within two hours.
- Avoid produce with mold. Also large bruises or cuts, and insect holes are great places for bacteria to hide and spread rapidly to the inside of the fruit or vegetable.
- If you do purchase "less than perfect" produce, plan to use it in cooked items such as spaghetti sauce or chili.

Eggs

- Eggs should be properly chilled at 40°F. Do not let them stay at room temperature.
- Make sure the eggs are clean and the shells are not cracked.
- Once eggs are washed they need to be dried and stored in covered containers since the natural protection has now been removed.

Milk and Cheeses

- Only buy pasteurized milk products. If it is labeled "For animal use only" it has not been pasteurized.
- Pregnant women, older adults, young children and people with weakened immune systems are at higher risk for illness caused by *Listeria*. Soft cheeses made from unpasteurized milk are one common source of *Listeria*. If you buy soft cheese, like feta, Brie, Camembert, blue-veined cheeses, queso blanco, queso fresco and panela, check the label to make sure it's made from pasteurized or treated milk.

Meat

- Meat should be kept in closed coolers with adequate amounts of ice.
- Perishables must be refrigerated within 2 hours (1 hour if it's over 90°F), so bring an insulated bag or cooler with you to keep meat cool on the way home.
- Separate meat from other ready-to-eat foods, so the juices from raw meat (which may contain harmful bacteria) do not come in contact with produce and other foods. This includes using separate grocery totes.

Juices, Cider and Honey

- Only buy juice, cider and honey that has been pasteurized to kill harmful bacteria. Pregnant women, children, older adults and people with weakened immune systems should be especially careful.

Ready-to-eat Items

Many farmers markets have prepared foods for your enjoyment. Remember, foods that should be served hot should be kept hot (over 140°F), and cold foods should be kept cold (under 40°F). If you buy perishable items, they should not remain unrefrigerated for over two hours, and only one hour in hot weather (90°F or above). Be especially careful of purchasing such items as pie slices, meat items, salads, etc. that are not kept cool or hot.

Grocery Totes

Reusable grocery totes are a popular, eco-friendly choice to transport food, but be sure to use separate totes for raw meat and poultry and ready-to-eat foods such as fresh produce and breads. It's important to wash reusable totes often. Reduce or eliminate bacteria by:

- Frequently washing grocery totes, either in the washing machine or by hand with hot, soapy water and drying them in a hot dryer
- Cleaning all areas where totes are placed, such as the kitchen counter
- Storing totes in a clean, dry location
- Avoiding leaving empty totes in the trunk of a vehicle unless wrapped.

Additional consumer food safety information can be found at www.fightc-les.org

Food safety regulations for farmer's markets in Tennessee can be found at
https://www.tn.gov/assets/entities/agriculture/attachments/AgFarFMRules.pdf

*Adapted from: How to Navigate the Farmer's Market by Wendy Marcason RDN, July 2015.