

# The hidden chemicals in fruit and vegetables

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Fruit and vegetables should be good for us, full of vitamins, minerals and fibre, but a Today Tonight investigation found they often contain a host of other nasty and dangerous additions.

Most vegetables and fruit are given fertilizers and chemical sprays, herbicides, fungicides and pesticides to protect them from pests, fungus and weeds.

And then they are handled, sometimes washed and packed, before we buy them. Australian regulatory authorities set strict standards for maximum pesticide residue levels and for pathogens, like the potentially fatal E.coli, which comes from human and animal waste.

But a lot of produce from developing countries like China doesn't have any legal restrictions on levels of pesticides and bacteria.

Today Tonight tested a range of popular fruit and vegetables from major supermarkets, Coles and Woolworths/Safeway and suburban greengrocers in Australian cities.

And we found that many of the chemicals, poisons and dangerous bacteria are still present when we eat these foods.

Our tests revealed frighteningly high levels of E.coli in salads.

The acceptable level is zero coliforms per gram, and the maximum level allowed is less than 10, yet one loose self-serve salad from a greengrocer - with no country of origin label - had 190 coliforms per gram.

Another, from the Woolworths/Safeway Gourmet range, had 800 coliforms per gram - that is 80 times more than the legal limit.

The Australian-grown salad was tested well before its use-by date, and was labelled "washed and ready to eat".

"They should be zero tolerance - no E.coli - and yet the tests showed an enormous amount of bacteria, coming from human waste or animal waste or contaminated by workers," explained food scientist Dr Geoff Skurray.

"It just shouldn't be on. It's a real health risk."

Several deaths and thousands of poisonings linked to pre-packed salads and baby spinach have sparked outrage in the United States.

In South Australia there have been 10 cases of severe E.coli believed to have been caused by imported fruit and vegetables.

Dr Skurray, from the University of Western Sydney, said: "Bacteria can easily get into the product because it has been handled by humans, and they may not have washed their hands.

"But it also can come from where they have grown because there could be sewerage or animal and human waste present as well."

Frances Warnock, from Fresh Produce Watch which helps monitor industry practices, said: "People need to be very careful about the way they handle loose leaf lettuce

"It is important they use good hygiene practices - I don't know anybody who washes their hands before buying those leaves, so they should use the tongs and they should keep their hands out of the product."

Woolworths told Today Tonight their food safety systems are rigorous, with limits of less than 10 coliforms per gram, and that packaged produce with levels of 800 coliforms had never been detected by the company or its suppliers.

While Australia has stringent standards when it comes to growing fruit and vegetables, in other countries, the industry is not so closely monitored.

"We've got health inspectors breathing down every shopkeeper's neck and yet we allow all these other contaminated vegetables into Australia,"

said Dr Skurray.

"We're stricter within Australia, but not strict on the imports."

The news on levels of pesticides, fungicides and herbicides was better - all the samples tested were below the legal maximum residue levels.

The tomatoes, baby corn, mushrooms and snow peas were found to contain no chemicals at all.

However, most of the peaches, mangoes, apples, herbs and some of the salads, we did detect small traces of chemical sprays, including organophosphates.

Eighty per cent of the mangoes we checked had between 10 and 50 per cent of the permitted maximum residue levels of pesticides.

All the peaches and apples tested had traces of chemicals - up to 50 per cent of allowable levels.

And Dr Skurray warns that even tiny traces have the potential to be harmful over time.

"It may be small levels of pesticide in the fruit but added up we will eat a whole lot day after day and accumulated, it could be a real health risk.

"When they accumulate they not only can cause cancer but they can also cause reproductive problems and neurological problems."

Frances Warnock advises that to get rid of pesticides, all fruit and vegetables should be washed thoroughly in a colander under running water.