

CONSUMER TIPS FOR HANDLING FRESH CANTALOUPE



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How do I choose a perfect cantaloupe?



Cantaloupes can be identified by the characteristic system of ridges that encompass the outside of the rind and look almost as if the fruit is covered in a net. Look for cantaloupes with prominent, cream-colored ridges and select those that are free of bruising. It is perfectly normal for one side where the cantaloupe has touched the ground as it grows in the field to be lighter in color or to have smoother ridges. The stem end of the cantaloupe should be smooth and well rounded. When ripe, this stem end will yield to light pressure. Another sure sign of a tasty, ripe melon is its sweet, musky aroma.

How should cantaloupes be stored at home?



Store whole, unripe melons in a cool area until ripe. Refrigerate when ripe, but do not freeze. It is best not to cut a cantaloupe until you are ready to eat it. If you need to return cut melon to the refrigerator, do not remove the seeds from the remaining sections as they keep the flesh from drying out. Cut melon should be wrapped tightly in plastic wrap and put back in the refrigerator immediately.

I've heard that cantaloupes can cause food poisoning. Is that true?



There has never been a foodborne illness outbreak associated with California cantaloupes. As with many other fresh produce items, cantaloupes are normally eaten fresh without cooking. This means that should the melon become contaminated with a foodborne pathogen it will not be destroyed by cooking.

There have been outbreaks associated with cantaloupes from other growing regions, including a Salmonella outbreak in 2002 linked to cantaloupes from southern Mexico that affected consumers in the United States and Canada. Since then, U.S. and Canadian governments have issued import exclusion on all Mexican cantaloupes requiring that exporters certify their cantaloupes are produced under proper conditions before they can be shipped to North American markets.



How do I know if the cantaloupe I buy is safe?

Recognizing their responsibility to provide consumers with a safe, wholesome product, California cantaloupe shippers initiated an ambitious food safety program in 1999. After much research and product testing, University of California scientists have determined that the likelihood of contracting a foodborne illness from California cantaloupe is very low. You can further ensure the safety of cantaloupe at home by following safe handling practices.



How should cantaloupes be prepared at home to ensure they are safe to eat?

University scientists recommend that melons should be washed under running tap water before cutting. If desired, a scrub brush can be used on the melon rind. Melons, like all fresh produce, must be strictly separated from all potential contact with food items such as raw chicken, meat, seafood and eggs. Food preparers should thoroughly wash their hands, utensils, countertops and cutting boards. Do not store cut cantaloupe at room temperature for any length of time. Sliced melon should be stored in the refrigerator until it is ready to be eaten.



Are there quality standards for cantaloupes?

In 1988, the California cantaloupe industry formed an organization called the California Cantaloupe Advisory Board. This Board, which represents most of the hundreds of cantaloupe growers and shippers in central California, requires mandatory inspection of their California cantaloupes to ensure quality and safety. Central California cantaloupes are available from July through late fall. During this period, over 90 percent of the cantaloupes sold in the U.S. are from central California. Cantaloupes sold in stores will often have a sticker identifying where they were grown.



What else should I know about California cantaloupes?

The California cantaloupe industry is committed to safe growing and handling practices. California cantaloupes are grown using the standardized principles of "Good Agricultural Practices," which are continually reviewed and updated through ongoing research. The hot, dry conditions in California growing areas along with careful field preparation and irrigation practices ensure that California cantaloupes stay dry during the growing period. This results in a cleaner melon. In addition, most California melons are packed directly from the field into shipping boxes, which means they are handled as little as possible, thereby lessening the likelihood of exposure to pathogens. In shed packing operations, care is taken to ensure the water used to clean the melons is continually tested and pathogen free. Cantaloupes from California's main growing region in the central San Joaquin Valley are subject to continuous government inspection to ensure quality and safety.

