

Mealtime Memo

June
2026



KEEP IT FRESH: STORING
FRUITS & VEGGIES SAFELY



When you handle and store fruits and vegetables correctly, they stay fresh and safe for the children in your care. This *Mealtime Memo* gives tips for cleaning and storing produce to help prevent waste and keep food safe.

Cleaning Produce

Before you prepare fresh fruits and vegetables:



- Wash your hands with soap and water.
- Rinse all produce under cool, running water— never soak it in a sink or container of water. This includes fruits and vegetables with peels or rinds you don't eat, such as melons, squash, pineapples, and oranges, since bacteria on the outside can spread to the inside when you cut or peel them.
- Use a clean produce brush on firm items, such as potatoes, cucumbers, and cantaloupe.
- Do not use soap, bleach, or produce washes. Water alone is best.
- Check for bruises, mold, or dirt. Cut away bad spots or discard the food item if it is completely unsafe.
- Do not rewash packaged produce labeled “ready-to-eat,” “washed,” or “triple-washed.”

Pro Tip: Wash fruits and veggies **before** you use them, **not before storing them.** Pre-washing can make them spoil faster.

Wash fruits and veggies **just before** you use them.



Where to Store Produce

Knowing where to keep fruits and vegetables helps them stay fresh longer. Here is a guide:

On the Counter

- Keep bananas and tomatoes at room temperature.
- Let avocados, mangoes, melons, peaches, plums, and pears ripen on the counter. Once ripe, move them to the fridge to stay fresh longer.
- Put fruit in a paper bag with a ripe banana to ripen it faster and check daily.



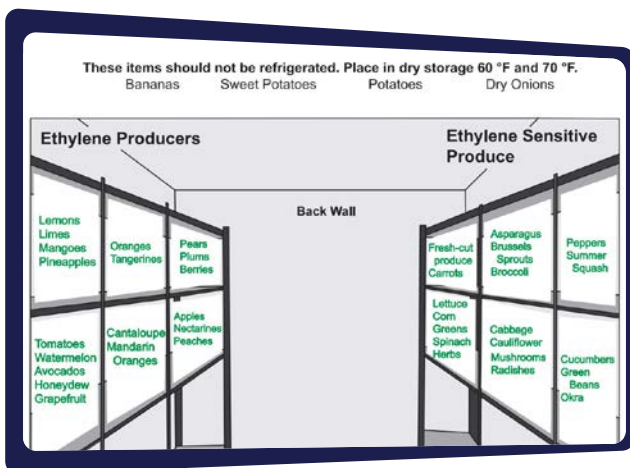
In the Pantry

- Store potatoes, sweet potatoes, onions, garlic, and winter squash in a cool, dark, dry place like a pantry.
- Keep onions separate from other produce—they release gas that can make other veggies spoil faster.



In the Fridge

- Keep cut, peeled, or cooked fruits and vegetables in a covered container, labeled with the date the produce was prepped or cooked.
- Refrigerate within four hours of cutting or cooking and store at 41 °F (5 °C) or colder.
- Keep raw foods (like meat, poultry, or seafood) away from and below produce to prevent cross-contamination.
- Store washed produce above unwashed or raw items.



Keep Fruits & Veggies Apart

Some fruits give off a natural gas called ethylene that can speed up ripening—and even spoil other produce faster.

- **Ethylene-producing fruits:** oranges, pears, apples, peaches, berries
- **Ethylene-sensitive vegetables:** cucumbers, asparagus, lettuce, broccoli, peppers, green beans

For best results, store ethylene-producing fruits away from ethylene-sensitive vegetables—preferably in separate fridge drawers. This helps produce last longer and reduces waste.

Need a visual guide?

Check out the [Storing Fresh Produce](#) handout.





Helpful Tips!

More Tools to Help

The ICN has helpful resources for refreshing your knowledge or training staff:

- [Produce Safety Fact Sheets](#)
- [Fresh Produce Storage & Safety Videos](#)

Proper produce handling not only keeps food fresh, it also keeps children safe. By following these tips, you can make food last longer, reduce waste, and serve safe, healthy meals daily.

References

Institute of Child Nutrition. (n.d.). *Food safety resources*.

<https://theicn.org/icn-resources-a-z/food-safety/>

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<https://theicn.org/resources/652/produce-safety-best-practices-fact-sheets/107984/produce-storage-chart-2.pdf>

Institute of Child Nutrition. (2022, November 10). *Child care center food safety guide*.

<https://theicn.org/icn-resources-a-z/child-care-center-food-safety-guide/>

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