DO YOU USE REUSABLE GROCERY BAGS?

The trend of swapping disposable grocery bags for reusable cloth and plastic-lined bags has become a popular choice. Reusable bags reduce waste but there are food safety concerns to consider.

Certain foods, such as raw produce, meat, poultry and fish may contain bacteria that cause foodborne illness. The fabric or materials in reusable grocery bags can become contaminated with germs like Salmonella or E. coli from foods or other items. These germs could then cross-contaminate other foods and non-food items.

If you use reusable grocery bags there are some simple steps you can follow to reduce cross-contamination and keep you and your family safe from germs.

Wash reusable grocery bags often. Reusable bags should be laundered after every use when carrying food just as you would wash a kitchen towel. Woven cloth bags should be machine or hand-washed with hot, soapy water and either dried in the dryer or air-dried. Plastic lined bags should be washed with hot, soapy water and air-dried. Bags with a plastic coating can be wiped down using anti-bacterial spray or wipes. If bags are hung to dry, sanitize the surface where bags will be placed. When was the last time you washed your reusable grocery bags?

Store reusable bags at home in a cool, dry area, away from sources of contamination, such as detergents, household cleaners and other chemicals. Organize your supply of reusable grocery bags and rotate their use. Take a different set of bags on each of your shopping trips. Avoid leaving the bags in your car trunk where bacteria can be activated by warm temperatures.
When in the grocery store don’t set the bags on the floor or on an unwashed surface. At checkout, don’t place the reusable bags on the conveyor belt. Hand the bags to the checker/bagger or carry the bags to the bagging area.

Use several bags to separate items. Keep dairy products, eggs, raw meat and poultry in separate bags away from fresh produce and other ready-to-eat items.

Always put raw meats into a disposable plastic bag before putting them in a reusable bag. The disposable plastic bag helps contain any juices that may drip off the meat packages and contaminate other foods.

Once at home and all the groceries are unpacked and put away, clean the areas where the bags were placed, especially if the bags were on the kitchen counter and table where food items may later be prepared or served.

Do not use reusable grocery bags for other purposes. Reusable grocery bags should only be used to carry food items. Don’t use the same reusable bags for baby bottles, toys, diapers, gym clothes, chemicals, gardening supplies or other non-food items. You may wish to use bags of one color for food items and bags of a different color for non-food items. Following these simple food safety tips will ensure that you are reducing potential cross-contamination and helping to keep you and your family safe from harmful bacteria when you use reusable grocery bags.

For additional information on ways to reduce the risk of foodborne illness, visit: www.foodsafety.gov; www.homefoodsafety.org; www.cleaninginstitute.org; www.fightbac.org.

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