

Don't Abandon Spinach, Expert Advises

The Food and Drug Administration's announcement in late September that Americans could resume buying and eating fresh spinach was welcomed with a sigh of relief not only by nutritionally conscious mothers everywhere but also by legions of health experts who view spinach as a green, leafy treasure trove of essential nutrients and minerals. Following the outbreak of a deadly strain of E. coli associated with raw, bagged spinach, some mothers even vowed that they never again would force a morsel of it into the defiant mouths of finicky children. But one nutritionist says these disillusioned mothers and other consumers should understand that spinach was not the cause of the outbreak. "The plant is not the culprit," says Dr. Robert Keith, an Alabama Cooperative Extension System nutrition specialist and Auburn University professor of nutrition and food science. "It was the growing conditions --- whatever these prove to be --- that led to the contamination, not the spinach itself," Keith stresses. To put it another way, blame the growing conditions, not the plant.

The FDA was busy throughout September correcting the causes behind the outbreak.

The tainted spinach came from Natural Selection Foods, a vegetable grower and processor in San Juan Bautista, Calif., said David Acheson, chief medical officer for the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. All the brands associated with the outbreak, which killed one person and sickened almost 200 in the United States and Canada, have been recalled. Farmers in the Salinas Valley, where the outbreak is believed to have occurred, have promised to improve testing of irrigation water and soil and to strengthen standards for field workers and packaging plants.

In the meantime, Keith urges mothers and other health-conscious consumers not to abandon spinach, which he considers "too good a nutritional food to pass up."

As a matter of fact, Keith says that Mom's and Popeye's advice to eat more spinach is as valid today as it was before the deadly outbreak occurred.

“There are lots of good things associated with spinach,” Keith says. For starters, it’s considered an excellent source of vitamin A or beta-carotene. Compared with a number of other vegetables, it’s also widely acknowledged as a good source of vitamin C, Keith says.

Like many green, leafy vegetables, spinach is also a prime source of folic acid, a nutrient that researchers now regard as an indispensable safeguard against several conditions, particularly birth defects in developing fetuses. While it doesn’t measure up to meat in terms of iron content, spinach is also a very good vegetable source for this mineral, Keith says.

Spinach is considered a good source of potassium, known to help lower blood pressure. It also contains ample amounts of calcium, though questions remain about how well this nutrient is absorbed in the course of consuming this vegetable. In addition, spinach is rich in magnesium, widely considered a potent safeguard against heart disease. It also contains healthy dietary fiber.

Finally, like all green, leafy vegetables, spinach is chock-full of phytochemicals and antioxidants, widely believed to protect us from heart disease and many forms of cancer. For those mothers and other consumers determined to steer clear of raw spinach at least for the time being, Keith says frozen and canned spinach are good nutritional bets, though he offers a couple of caveats.

In nutritional content, both frozen and canned sources fall slightly short of raw spinach. Also, people suffering from hypertension or trying to reduce their blood pressure should avoid canned spinach, which is higher in sodium content than raw or frozen spinach.

Aside from that, Keith says that all of the advice associated with spinach is as valid now as it was before the E. coli outbreak. The bottom line, he says, is to keep eating spinach. For more Food Safety/Preservation/Preparation questions call your local County Extension Office or call your Regional Extension Agent in Food Safety, Angela Treadaway at 205-410-3696.