

Sniff Out Odor-Absorbing Produce

Ever crunched a carrot or munched an apple that tasted slightly different than normal? Chances are your taste buds raised a big stink about odors absorbed from other foods stored in close proximity.

Many fruits and vegetables tend to cause off-flavors and aromas in meat, dairy products and other fruits and vegetables, says Peter Ferretti, professor of vegetable crops in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"The closer and more enclosed the fresh produce is the more chance for odors to intermix," Ferretti says. "In an enclosed area like a refrigerator, odors really can be a problem. Consumers shouldn't experience startling taste changes three or four days after purchase, but beyond that you might have problems."

Kathleen Brown, associate professor of post-harvest physiology at Penn State, suggests that consumers try to rotate their produce purchases, using the oldest fruits and vegetables first so food items are not stored longer than a week to 10 days.

Ferretti warns that odors are more likely to be absorbed at higher temperatures, which means consumers should not intermingle refrigerated fruits and vegetables with produce that is commonly stored at or slightly below room temperature, such as apples and onions.

Ferretti says that not every consumer will notice a difference in taste. "Taste is a genetic trait," he explains. "Some people can sharply define tastes, and others have more bland taste ranges. Our sense of smell works in tandem with our taste buds, so an off-odor can affect how an apple tastes, even if the odor has not truly penetrated the skin."

Ferretti and Brown list some popular fruits and vegetables whose odors penetrate other foods.

-Apples. Apple odor is absorbed by cabbage, carrots, figs, onions, meat, eggs and dairy products. "Many consumers store apples in the refrigerator to keep them crisp, but in that space their odor may cause problems," Brown says.

-Carrots. Celery can absorb the odor of carrots. "it gives celery sort of an earthy taste," Ferretti says.

-Onions (large bulb types) and garlic. Aromas from bulb onions affect apples, celery, potatoes and pears.

-Green bunching or scallion onions. Odors from these onions affect corn, figs, greens and mushrooms. "Scallion odor will noticeably affect flavor," Ferretti adds.

-Pears. Pear odor is absorbed by cabbage, carrots, celery, onions and potatoes.

-Potatoes. Aromas from potatoes affect apples and pears. "Potatoes are almost always stored separately from other produce, so odor usually isn't a big problem," Ferretti says.

-Green peppers. Green pepper odor will be absorbed by many fruits, including pineapples. "Ripened green peppers, which usually are red, orange or yellow, do not have as strong an aroma," Ferretti says.

-Citrus fruit. Citrus odor is absorbed by meat, eggs and dairy products.

-Grapes. Most commercial grapes are treated with sulfur dioxide for disease and insect control, giving the fruit a sulfurous aroma. "produce experts say don't wash most fruits before refrigerating them, but grapes are the exception," Ferretti says. "By washing grapes thoroughly, the sulfur residue and smell will wash off. Also, people tend to snack on grapes, eating three or four at a time. They aren't as likely to wash a small number of grapes."

Brown suggests separating produce into individual bags, or using one crisper drawer only for fruits and another for vegetables. Bagged or wrapped produce is less likely to absorb or emit odors.

If produce has been stored long enough to absorb odors, Ferretti recommends using the fruit or vegetable in a soup, stew or casserole where the flavors and aromas will intermingle.

He also says consumers can counteract some of the odor absorption by placing a box of baking soda in the refrigerator, crisper drawer or pantry. "Baking soda also absorbs moisture," he says. "Baking soda can last quite a while because the top layer absorbs most of the odor and moisture, so homeowners can shake the top layer into the waste can and renew the treatment."

Family Living Focus

by
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Identity Theft

The Growing Crime of Identity Theft It's supper time and your phone rings. You think, "Not another telemarketer!" The voice on the other end demands that you make a payment on the loan for furniture from Easy Sam's in Alpena, Michigan.

You're confused. You've never set foot in the state of Michigan. And you have never borrowed to buy furniture. But the speaker insists that you pay now or else.

What's going on? Chances are you are the victim of identity theft.

What is Identity Theft? Identity theft occurs when someone uses bits and pieces of information about another individual usually including their Social Security number to represent him or herself as that person for fraudulent purposes.

For example, the defrauding person may obtain credit cards or loans in someone else's name and then not pay the bills. Or worse, commit a crime using the victim's name.

While the victim is not liable for the bills accumulated by the imposter, the victim may have months or years of anxiety and expense trying to regain financial health and restore good credit history.

The Privacy Rights Clearinghouse in San Diego, CA reports that identity theft doesn't get the attention from law enforcement that violent crime receives. Consequently, an increasing number of criminals, including organized crime rings, are moving into this area. Identity thieves are rarely apprehended and convicted. And even if they are, sentencing is light.

How Can Someone Steal Your Identity? The U. S. General Accounting Office estimates that there are 400,000 victims of identity theft each year in this country and that number is increasing.

Just how does an identity thief get your personal information? Stealing wallets was the old-fashioned way to get another person's identity. Today the techniques are far more sophisticated. The criminal may pose as an employer, loan officer or landlord and order a copy of your credit report that will contain all the information needed. Identity thieves may "shoulder surf" at an ATM machine or pay phone in order to capture PINs (personal identification numbers). Your mail may be stolen from your mailbox. A "dumpster diver" may go through a business's trash looking for unshredded receipts. An "insider" with access to a company's computer may steal private information about customers or employees. More often than you would think, a family member, roommate or trusted caregiver may steal from someone whose personal effects are available to them.

The credit industry has made it very easy to obtain credit and credit grantors may not adequately check the identities of applicants before granting credit. Pre-approved credit card offers sent by mail are easy targets for thieves. Sloppy business practices such as throwing out unshredded documents or allowing dishonest employees access to computer files and personnel records are other ways that identity thieves can get your information.

Can You Protect Yourself? How can you minimize your exposure to identity theft? Do not carry extra credit cards, your Social Security card, birth certificate or passport in your wallet or purse except when you will need it. Remove your name from marketing lists to reduce the number of pre-approved offers of credit you receive. The three major credit bureaus use the same phone number, 1-888-567-8688, to handle such requests.

Shred or tear into small pieces any offers that come to you. Have a security fraud alert added to your credit files at the three major credit bureaus. This two-sentence statement mandates that before any new credit account can be opened, the credit grantor must call your designated phone number to verify that the account is legitimate. Install a locked mailbox or use a post office box. Mail any envelopes containing checks at the post office.

Carry just one or two credit cards. Cancel all unused accounts.

Contact your local Cooperative Extension office for a copy of a close credit account form letter or go to <http://html://AgExtEd.cas.psu.edu/FCS/cb/credit.html>. Look for "Credit Bureaus." Click on Close Credit Account Form Letter. Even if you don't use accounts they remain in your credit report complete with account numbers that can be used by thieves.

Keep a list of all credit cards, account numbers, expiration dates and phone numbers of their customer service and fraud departments in a secure place so you can immediately contact your creditors if the cards are stolen. Do the same with your bank accounts.

Never give your credit card number or other personal information over the phone unless you have a trusted business relationship with the company and you initiated the call.

Beware of fake stories about winning a prize if you identify yourself with your credit card.

Order your credit report from each of the three credit bureaus at least once a year to check for inaccuracies and fraudulent use of your information. Always take credit receipts with you; never toss them in a public trash container. When creating passwords and PINS don't choose part of your Social Security number, your birth date or any other easily discovered choice. Memorize your passwords and PINS.

Protect your Social Security number. Never give it out unless absolutely necessary. Don't print it on your checks or let merchants hand write it on your checks. Carefully review all credit card statements and phone bills for any unauthorized use.

What If You Are A Victim? If you are a victim of identity theft, act immediately. Report the crime to the police. Call your credit card issuers; follow up in writing.

Pay particular attention to creditors for accounts that have been tampered with or opened fraudulently. Phone the fraud units of the three credit reporting companies. Notify your bank of the theft. Keep a log of all conversations with businesses, including dates and names, about your identity theft problem. Send all correspondence by certified mail. Keep copies of all documents.

The Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, www.privacyrights.org, phone 619-298-3396, has lots of good, detailed advice on dealing with identity theft.

The Federal Trade Commission is the federal clearinghouse for consumer complaints about identity theft. The toll-free number to call is 877-FTC-HELP or use the complaint form at www.ftc.gov.



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