

Fiddleheads and Food Safety

What are fiddleheads?

Fiddleheads are the edible curled shoots of the ostrich fern and are seasonal vegetables enjoyed by many New Brunswickers.

Fiddleheads have become a seasonal delicacy in New Brunswick and many parts of Canada.

Fiddleheads are found in the wild in early spring and are also harvested for use as vegetables. You may also find fiddleheads being served in restaurants or sold at farmer's markets, by the roadside, and even in some grocery stores.

Potential for foodborne illness

While fiddleheads have been shown to have much nutritional value to our diet, there have been cases of illness in Canada and the United States associated with eating raw or undercooked fiddleheads. The cause of illness is not yet known, though proper cooking has been shown to reduce the risk of becoming ill. Fiddleheads should never be eaten raw and should always be properly handled and thoroughly cooked.

Symptoms of illness from eating raw or undercooked fiddleheads usually appear within 30 minutes to 12 hours of consumption and typically last for less than 24 hours but may last as long as three (3) days. Symptoms may include diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps and headaches. Adverse symptoms can result in dehydration, especially in higher-risk individuals, such as the elderly, infants, and those with underlying medical conditions.

If experiencing symptoms after eating fiddleheads, it is advisable to seek advice from a health care professional and contact the nearest [regional Health Protection Branch office](#).

Food safety tips

Here are some food safety tips that will allow you to enjoy this seasonal delicacy:

1. Cleaning fresh fiddleheads

- Using your fingers, remove as much of the brown husk as possible.
- Wash fiddleheads in several changes of fresh cold water. This will remove any remaining husk and/or dirt.

2. Cooking fiddleheads

- Cook fiddleheads in boiling water for at least 15 minutes, or steam them for 10-12 minutes. Discard this water and do not re-use for any other purpose.
- Cook fiddleheads as described above before sautéing, frying, baking or making other foods where fiddleheads are an ingredient (i.e., soups, casseroles, etc.).

3. Freezing fiddleheads

- First, thoroughly clean the fiddleheads as described above.
- Blanch the fiddleheads for two (2) minutes.
- Plunge the fiddleheads into cold water, and then drain.
- Discard the blanching water.
- Pack the drained fiddleheads in freezer containers or bags.
- Store in the freezer for up to one year.
- When you are ready to prepare the fiddleheads for eating, follow the cooking instructions as described above.

4. Preserving fiddleheads

- A pressure canner is not recommended because safe process times have not been established for home-preserved fiddleheads.

More Information

Food Safety Tips for Fiddleheads:

<http://healthycanadians.gc.ca/recall-alert-rappel-avis/hc-sc/2015/53319a-eng.php>

Natural Toxins in Fresh Fruits and Vegetables:

<http://www.inspection.gc.ca/food/consumer-centre/food-safety-tips/specific-products-and-risks/natural-toxins/eng/1332276569292/1332276685336>