

Resources

More information on safe grocery shopping can be found in the [Kitchen Companion: Your Safe Food Handbook](#) from the FSIS/USDA website:
http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Kitchen_Companion/index.asp.

The Center for Hygiene and Health has a companion brochure on safe food transportation, handling, and cooking outdoors: [Food Safety and the BBQ](#).



Center for Hygiene & Health in the Home and Community

The Center for Health and Hygiene in the Home and Community serves as a national and international resource for information and education, applied research, professional training, and conferences. The Center focuses on issues relating to hygiene and infection control in areas such as:

- Consumer food safety
- Home hygiene
- Daycare
- Preschool
- Homecare
- Sports and leisure activity
- Travel and hospitality

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Paper, Plastic, or Cloth? How to Bag Groceries and Get Them Home Safely



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Reusable cloth grocery bags have become very popular among shoppers. By reducing the consumption of plastic grocery bags, shoppers feel that they are helping to lessen environmental pollution. Recently, however, a study funded by the Environment and Plastics Industry Council has questioned the safety of cloth grocery bags to our health. The study, entitled "A Microbiological Study of Reusable Grocery Bags," evaluated the results of swab tests performed on used cloth grocery bags (http://www.cpia.ca/files/files/AMicrobiologicalStudyofReuseablePlasticGrocery_Bags.pdf.) Investigators found high counts of yeast, mould, and bacteria growing in the bags; they concluded that contaminated cloth bags could be a source of food poisoning.



Environmental Impact

Should we all be using plastic and paper bags again? Not necessarily. Cloth grocery bags have been used in Europe for as long as anyone can remember, with no increased rates of food poisoning documented. Such long-term use of cloth bags does remove a lot of plastic from the environment. Plastic grocery bags, however, are considered to be safe. They are manufactured from polyethylene (PE), which is inert, will not leach into food substances, will not promote the growth of germs, and disintegrates in less than 6 months if left in sunlight – without releasing leachate or methane gas.^{1,2} Paper bags appear more

environmentally friendly but consume 425% more energy to produce than PE bags, are heavy to transport, use up trees, and generate methane in landfills.^{1,2} Though plastic bags are at times necessary, the bottom line may be that long-term use of cloth grocery bags can be safe and lower the use of plastic and paper. They are roomy, sturdy, and can even be used instead of carts or baskets.

¹[http://www.epa.gov/cgi-bin/epalink?logname=allsearch&referrer=ldpe|9|metabth&target=http://yosemite.epa.gov/oar/globalwarming.nsf/UniqueKeyLookup/SHSU5BNPMV/\\$File/canada.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/cgi-bin/epalink?logname=allsearch&referrer=ldpe|9|metabth&target=http://yosemite.epa.gov/oar/globalwarming.nsf/UniqueKeyLookup/SHSU5BNPMV/$File/canada.pdf). Accessed on May 28, 2009.
²<http://www.arpacanada.ca/index.php/issuesresearch/environment/230-ban-the-bag>. Accessed on May 23, 2009.

Guidelines For Safe Cloth Grocery Bag Use

- Cloth grocery bags should be laundered or sanitized often, plus any time a spill occurs.
- Use an EPA-registered food contact surface disinfectant product; this includes EPA-registered bleach disinfectant products (check the label for a "EPA Est. #.")
- ½ cup of household bleach diluted in 1 gallon of water is an effective sanitizing agent - beware of colored fabric bags!
- Let bags dry completely after a spill or cleaning; a damp, dark bag is an ideal breeding ground for germs.
- Make sure meats and other foods that may leak are properly positioned or wrapped – plastic bags may be necessary for this.
- Any food that comes into direct contact with the bag (fruits, vegetables) should be washed before eating.
- Separate, don't cross-contaminate: if possible, designate one bag for raw meat,

poultry, seafood, and eggs; use a separate bag for produce and dry goods.

- Cloth grocery bags should be reserved for food; do not use them as gym or diaper bags, as this can introduce dangerous bacteria into your food.
- Don't forget to wash you hands before and after handling any food!



Getting Food Home Safely

Besides contamination by bacteria and viruses, groceries are most likely to spoil because of heat. A few steps can get your food home safely:

- Bring a cooler, cool bags, or ice packs inside your cloth bags for perishables (meat, dairy, frozen food, etc).
- At the grocery store, select cold food last, just before checking out.
- Check meat and poultry packages for leaks or tears, and place them in a plastic bag to prevent cross-contamination of other foods in your cart.
- Place groceries, especially perishables, in the body of the car rather than the trunk, which is not ventilated or air-conditioned.
- Drive straight home and unload groceries immediately. Perishable food must be placed in the refrigerator or freezer within **2 hours**; if the outside temperature is 90°F or above, perishables must be refrigerated within **1 hour**.