



Food Safety for Fiddleheads

Fiddleheads (crosiers) are the curled, edible shoots of the ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*). They are considered a seasonal delicacy harvested commercially in many parts of the Northern United States and Canada. Fiddleheads are collected in the wild, sold as a seasonal vegetable or served in restaurants. They are also sold in cans or as a frozen product.

Potential Foodborne Illness

A number of outbreaks of foodborne illness from eating raw or undercooked fiddleheads have been reported in

Canada and the United States since 1994. Studies to date have not determined the cause of these illnesses.

Under no circumstances should fiddleheads be eaten raw. Proper handling and thorough cooking of fiddleheads can reduce the risk of foodborne illness.



Fiddlehead of a Fern
Photo Credit, David Fuller

Cleaning Fresh Fiddleheads

- Remove as much of the brown papery husk as possible using your fingers.
- Wash the fiddleheads in several changes of fresh cold water to remove any residual husk or dirt.

Cooking Fiddleheads

Before eating fiddleheads, make sure to follow these steps:

- Cook them in a generous amount of boiling water for 15 minutes or steam them for 10 to 12 minutes. Discard water used for boiling or steaming fiddleheads.
- Follow the above instructions before sautéing, frying, baking or making other foods (e.g. soups, casseroles) using fiddleheads.

Freezing Fiddleheads

Before freezing fiddleheads, you should follow these steps:

- Clean fiddleheads as outlined above.
- Blanch fiddleheads for two minutes.
- Plunge fiddleheads in cold water. Drain.
- Discard the blanching water.
- Pack drained fiddleheads in freezer containers or bags.
- Store them in the freezer for up to one year.
- Follow the complete cooking steps outlined above before serving.

Preserving fiddleheads

Preserving fiddleheads with a pressure canner is not recommended, as safe process times have not been established for home-preserved fiddleheads.

You can find [safe recipes](#) for preparing fiddleheads at Maine Cooperative Extension.

Symptoms of illness from eating fiddleheads

Symptoms of illness from eating fiddleheads typically appear within 30 minutes to 12 hours after eating raw or undercooked fiddleheads. As is the case with other foodborne illnesses, the symptoms may include diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps and headaches. Illness generally lasts less than 24 hours but can last up to three days. The adverse symptoms can result in dehydration, particularly among older people, infants and those with underlying medical conditions.

If you experience adverse symptoms after eating fiddleheads, you should seek the advice of a health care professional and contact your local [Public Health Center](#).

The [Center for Disease Control and Prevention](#) estimates that there are approximately 48 million cases of food-related illnesses in the United States every year. Many of these illnesses could be prevented by following proper food handling and preparation techniques.

For more information on food safety, please visit: <http://dec.alaska.gov/eh/fss/index.htm>

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