



First Nations Health Authority
Health through wellness

Food Safety tips for Fiddleheads



Fiddleheads are the curled, edible young shoots of the ostrich fern. Fresh fiddlehead ferns are harvested in spring. Similar to a lot of vegetation and wild plants, fiddleheads are nutritious. Fiddleheads have high concentrations of antioxidants and polyunsaturated fatty acid and hold a cultural significance amongst Indigenous peoples. Historically, First Nations peoples taught white settlers how to find, pick and prepare fiddleheads in the spring.

Health risks

Fiddleheads can be an excellent source of vitamins and nutrients. Like many harvested foods, there are protocols and precautionary steps to take. For fiddleheads, it is not advisable to eat them raw as they can cause food poisoning. A number of foodborne illness outbreaks or food poisonings have been reported in Canada and the United States due to improper preparation of fiddleheads. The cause of these illnesses is from an unidentified natural toxin in the fiddlehead.

Symptoms usually begin 30 minutes to 12 hours after ingestion. They may include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal cramps, and headaches. Despite the benign and self-limiting nature of the toxic side effects, dehydration can be a concern to vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly and those with medical conditions.

If symptoms persist, contact the Poison Control Centre.

Other types of ferns such as foxglove and bracken should not be consumed because they may be toxic or carcinogenic.

Food preparation

Through proper handling and thorough cooking, the potential for foodborne illness can be reduced.

CLEANING

- Using your fingers, as much as possible remove as much of the brown papery husk on the fiddlehead
- Wash the fiddleheads in fresh clean water several times to remove any residual husk or dirt

COOKING

- Cook fiddleheads in a sufficient amount of boiling water for 15 minutes or steam them for 10 to 12 minutes until tender. Discard the water used for boiling or steaming as it may contain the toxin
- Cook fiddleheads by boiling or steaming before sautéing, frying, baking or using them in other foods like mousses and soups

FREEZING

The following steps should be followed for proper freezing

- Clean fiddleheads properly
- Blanch or boil them for 2 minutes
- Plunge the fiddleheads into fresh potable cold water and drain
- Discard cooking water
- Pack the fiddleheads in freezer containers or bags. Store fiddleheads in the freezer for up to one year for best quality
- Follow cooking instructions before serving
- Never re-freeze thawed food

PRESERVING

Fiddleheads should not be preserved using a pressure canner at home because safe process times have not been established for home-preserved fiddleheads.

References

Food safety tips for fiddleheads. Health Canada (2015).

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-safety-fruits-vegetables/fiddlehead-safety-tips.html>.

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