

Fiddleheads Can Cause Foodborne Illness

What are Fiddleheads?

Fiddleheads are young, tightly curled fronds of the Ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*). They are harvested seasonally (starting in the spring), and commonly from uncultivated lands. Fiddleheads are distributed to retail grocers and restaurants. They may be served in soups, or cooked and served as a hot vegetable.

How do Fiddleheads Cause Illness?

Fiddleheads have been linked to several suspected outbreaks of gastroenteritis. Symptoms usually include nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, headache and diarrhoea. Symptoms start within an hour after consumption and continue from 4 to 18 hours.

What is the Cause?

Although no causative agent has been identified, a bacterial source has been ruled out. It is assumed that an unidentified toxin is responsible for the illnesses.



Recommended Cooking Procedures

In most reports of illness the product was eaten raw or lightly cooked. This toxin can be destroyed by thoroughly heating (cooking) the fiddleheads.

Hence, fiddleheads should be

- ✓ washed in several changes of cold water
- ✓ cooked either
 - in boiling water for 15 minutes, or
 - steamed for 10-12 minutes
- ✓ water used for boiling or steaming fiddleheads should be discarded as it may contain the toxin

Fiddleheads should not be consumed

- ✗ if they have opened beyond the tightly curled stage
- ✗ with only minimum cooking such as sautéing for short periods

Fiddleheads can be safely consumed if these simple precautionary cooking procedures are followed.

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