

# Guide to Checking Fruits and Vegetables

## Introduction by Rabbi Yisroel Langer

The kosher consumer would never dream of eating processed food without a reliable hashgacha. What many people don't realize is that an ordinary salad has more potential kashrus concerns than most other foods. Many of the vegetables and lettuces that we consume have insects that are "hiding" on them. Each insect consumed is subject to 4-6 prohibitions in the Torah (depending on the type of insect). The Pri Chadash (end of Siman 84) tells us that the reason for the multiple warnings about the transgressions of eating an insect is because the Torah knows that insects in fruits and vegetables are very commonplace, and we need to remain vigilant in order to avoid stumbling in this area. Chazal (Yuma 39a) tell us that eating non-kosher foods, such as insects, places a spiritual obstruction in his "heart" which prevents him from coming close to Hashem. The Sefer Reishis Chachmah (cited by Kaf HaChaim Siman 24) teaches us that when consuming insects in our produce, it not only pulls us down spiritually, but can also bring terrible physical illnesses upon a person as well (rachmona l'tzlan).

When hashgachos warn consumers about the various insects in produce, many of us think that these are merely extra stringencies. After all, we say, my mother was a G-d fearing woman and she served broccoli and spinach without checking, so how bad can it be? What we don't realize, though, is that in earlier years, produce had a much lower level of infestation. 45 years ago, certain pesticides, such as DDT, were banned, and the removal of these potent pesticides led to greater levels of infestation. Additionally, in the modern day importing and exporting of produce, new strains of insects are being imported and exported as well. Okay, we say to ourselves, but what about the days before pesticides? How did they eat produce 100 years ago? As can be seen from sefarim written years ago, they were indeed very conscientious of this. For example, the Sefer Chayei Adam (Chochmos Adam Siman 38:15-19, 28) has a comprehensive list of all types of vegetable and berries from various cities that one should refrain from consuming due to insect infestation in those foods. He warns us about leafy vegetables from all countries which may contain insects and must be checked extremely carefully. A question frequently asked is how could some of the berries or leafy vegetables be problematic and perhaps even not recommended? Didn't Hashem create them for us to enjoy? The Ohr Hachaim (Shemos 16:20) tells us that infestation of insects in produce happens because the air becomes poisoned from our sins. Therefore, Hashem intended that we would be able to eat these vegetables, but due to *aveiros*, we can lose our opportunity to eat them. If the Ohr Hachaim wrote this in the 1700s when people were much more pious, all the more so that it is true nowadays.

Do I have to check every piece of food for a bug prior to consumption? No, not everything has to be checked for insects. There are 3 categories of food: 1) Foods that contain insects in most samples, are given a status known as "muchzak b'tolaim" (assumed to harbor insects), and there is a *Torah* obligation to find and remove any possible insect 2) Foods that often have insects, although many times they don't. This category of produce needs to be checked m'drabonin 3) Foods that rarely have insects and as such have no obligation to be checked at all. Which category a specific fruit or vegetable belongs in depends on the location and specific growing conditions and may vary from place to place or from season to season. For example, a peach purchased from a local fruit store does not need to be checked since it is highly uncommon to find a bug on it. However, if you were going peach picking in an orchard, tiny insects such as mites can be found crawling on them, and the fruits would require checking or washing prior to eating.

This above provides the basis upon which we allow for checking leafy vegetables and herbs using the thrip cloth method described in the Overview. The concept is that if no bugs can be found on the cloth, then it is considered improbable that there are any bugs left in the produce. However, a strong word of caution: like many areas in Halacha, there is a need for “shimush” (training) to help identify insects such as aphids and thrips which are clearly visible to the naked eye but aren’t always recognizable to the untrained checker. One should not merely rely on reading this guide alone but should also seek out someone who has experience to help learn from the size and shapes of what are forbidden insects. For those who do not have the ability to do so or whose eyesight is no longer what it used to be there is an alternate method detailed in the Overview that safely allows one to consume select produce according to Halacha.

Chazal (Bava Metziah 61b) tell us that if it would only be for the merit of not eating insects, then that alone would have been reason enough for Hashem to redeem us from Mitzrayim. Let us hope that in the zechus of being more meticulous in the observance of this mitzvah that Hashem will redeem us from this galus b’vivas Moshiach Tzidkeinu, Amein.

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