



Fiddleheads A Potential Cause of Foodborne Illness

What Are They?

Fiddleheads are young, tightly curled fronds of the Ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*). They are harvested seasonally 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.

Might Fiddleheads Cause Illness?

Although a causative agent has yet to be identified, fiddleheads have been linked to several suspected outbreaks of gastroenteritis. Fiddleheads have been distributed commercially for several years. On two occasions, 1990 and 1994, fiddleheads were linked to illness. Symptoms usually include nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, headache and diarrhea. Symptoms start within an hour after consumption and continue from 4 to 18 hours.

What Was The Cause?

Although no causative agent has been identified, a bacterial source has been ruled out. It is assumed that a heat labile, unidentified toxin was responsible for the illnesses. In all cases the product was eaten raw or lightly cooked.

Recommended Cooking Procedures

All reported illnesses have been linked to the consumption of raw or lightly cooked fresh fiddleheads. Hence, fiddleheads should be:

- washed in several changes of cold water.
- cooked either:
 - in boiling water for 15 minutes, or
 - steamed for 10 to 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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