

Eating Mushrooms Safely

By Susan Goldhor

Enjoy mushroom hunting, but be very careful about eating wild mushrooms. Mushroom poisoning symptoms may manifest themselves from three hours to three weeks. Serious cases can lead to permanent liver and kidney damage or even death.

If you suspect that you have been poisoned, call the Poison Control Center Hotline anywhere in the US at 1-800-222-1222. Or go to the ER.

To improve your identifications skills, attend the BMC's fall classes on mushroom identification, and our ID sessions at Harvard's Farlow Herbarium on Monday evenings after every foray.

Basic Precautions

- If you can't confidently identify a mushroom, don't eat it. **When in doubt, throw it out!**
- Don't mix species in the same meal, unless you have eaten them all separately in the past.
- With new species, don't cook all; leave some behind for identification in case of sickness.
- The first time you eat a new species, eat just a small portion.
- Some mushrooms contain natural Antabuse, which combines with alcohol to produce violent nausea, difficulty breathing, mental confusion, etc. Know what those species are, and don't drink alcohol with them or the day after.
- Don't feed wild mushrooms to small children.
- Don't eat or freeze raw mushrooms.

While Collecting

Looks are deceiving. Some small, innocuous-looking mushrooms are toxic. Some of the best edibles are weird looking, and some of the deadliest mushrooms look lovely and are delicious. (Or so folks have claimed just before having liver transplants.)

Animals' bite marks do not indicate safe eating. Squirrels, rabbits, bears, and deer have evolved enzymes to detoxify the poisons. You haven't.

If the mushrooms are obviously **buggy or partially rotten**, leave them behind.

The soil may be toxic. Toxicity can come not only from the mushroom but also from where it grew. Perfect lawns have probably been chemically treated. Lawns full of dandelions and other weeds are better sources. Mulches are often treated with toxic chemicals. Most old apple orchards were treated with arsenic compounds long ago, and the soils still retain the arsenic.

How to collect. If you need to have the mushroom identified, dig up the whole specimen and note the soil and the adjacent trees. Clean off dirt from edible species before putting them in the bag; once dirt gets into the gills or pores, you'll never get it all out. I always have a knife in my pack with a stiff brush attached. (And yes, I've had it confiscated at airports.)

Put mushrooms in brown or wax paper bags. Don't carry or store them in plastic bags, which hasten decay. (Keep some in your pack all the time -- who knows when you'll find a treasure?) Egg cartons are great for small specimens.

Taste, but don't swallow. Taste is a diagnostic feature for certain mushrooms. Don't worry about taking a small taste of a species that might be toxic, as long as you spit it out. In fact, tasting is a good idea even for mushrooms that are non-toxic. If they are bitter or burn your tongue, you probably don't want them. (I once carried a perfect bolete weighing more than two pounds for three miles in my hands -- no pack, no bag -- only to find when I got it home that it was a bitter bolete. Why didn't I taste it earlier?)

In the Kitchen

Cook all mushrooms well. Personally, I don't even eat buttons from the supermarket raw, but many do, with no ill effects. Still, don't eat any other species raw. Many raw mushrooms contain carcinogens or toxic chemicals that are inactivated by heat. I eat steak tartare, rare poultry, sashimi and undercooked eggs. But my mushrooms are always well done!

Never freeze mushrooms raw — cook them first.

At the Table

Many people have unpleasant responses to some of the non-toxic, but unusual, chemicals, in certain species. Every year, folks go to the ER after eating such choice edibles as *Boletus edulis*, *Cantharellus cibarius*, *Morchella esculenta*, etc. So, when you eat a wild mushroom for the first time, **eat sparingly** and see how you feel afterwards. Treat your guests with the same caution.

Learn a Few Edibles

The following (almost) unmistakable, great edibles can be found in New England. Apart from morels, the rest are late summer and fall species. Once you know the names, you can look them up in books or the Internet. I recommend *Edible Wild Mushrooms of North America* by Fischer & Bessette.

Morels:	<i>Morchella esculenta</i>
Puffballs:	<i>Calvatia</i> spp. & <i>Lycoperdon</i> spp.
Chanterelles:	<i>Cantharellus cibarius</i>
Black Trumpet:	<i>Craterellus fallax</i>
Sweet Tooth:	<i>Hydnum repandum</i>
Lions Mane:	<i>Hericium</i> spp.
Porcini and its friends.:	<i>Boletus</i> , <i>Leccinum</i> , & <i>Suillus</i> spp.
Chicken of the Woods:	<i>Laetiporus sulphureus</i>
Hen of the Woods:	<i>Grifola frondosa</i>
Oyster:	<i>Pleurotus ostreatus</i>
Honey:	<i>Armillaria mellea</i>

You're about to embark on a lifelong adventure that will bring you closer to nature; to hunter-gatherers; to early humans. Eating something that you can't buy in a store, that you've found and gathered yourself, is a thrill that we all share. There's a reason why you pick plants or berries, but *hunt* mushrooms. Have fun!