Dear Alice,

I get the apples provided in the dining hall on campus every day and have noticed that they are completely coated with wax (scratching the surface produces white flakes). I was wondering, how harmful is the wax if I eat two or three apples a day?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Good question to wax on. And, kudos to you for eating lots of fruit! Are apples and other fruits coated with wax okay to eat? Yes! According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the coating is considered safe and approved for use on all kinds of foods.

Here's what you might not know: just-picked produce, including apples, actually produce a natural wax coat all on their own with wax to help prevent them from drying out and becoming mushy. Before these products are delivered to markets for sale, they are washed and rinsed of dust and chemical residues, but about half of the original wax coating is lost during this cleaning process. As a result, FDA-approved edible coating or wax is added to make sure that produce is protected during transport, storage, and sale, to hinder the growth of mold, as well as to make them look more appealing and appetizing. What's more: only a few drops of the edible wax is applied to your apple to provide a microscopic coating. Places that sell produce are required to label fresh produce so that the consumer knows if a wax coating has been added to the available fruits and vegetables. That being said, wiping and washing produce before eating or cooking is recommended to help remove dirt, a certain amount of bacteria, and, yes, some of the wax. This may be as easy as using regular tap water to accomplish the task!

And, since your question is coated in curiosity, apples aren't the only product that may come with an edible film or coating. If the chocolate you're eating has a gleaming candy-coating, it's likely enveloped in a coating to keep them fresh on the shelf and put the shine in your sugar-laden treat. Sometimes, a bit of coating helps the medicine go down: both prescription and over-the-counter pills may have this feature to mask a bitter taste and provide a time-release function to the medication. Even commercially-available French fries may be coated with an edible film to protect the potato slices during storage, preserve crispiness, and regulate the amount of oil uptake that occurs during the frying process.
Food science? it's got you covered. How're them apples now?

Alice!
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