

Food For Thought

Preparing a Safe Home-Packed School Lunch A Parents Guide

If you pack lunches for your child to take to school, the steps taken during the process from preparation to consumption all factor in to the food being safe to eat. Home-packed lunches, especially those containing perishable foods, need to be packed and handled properly in order to reduce the risk of food borne illness.

In general, perishable foods should not be left at room temperature for more than two hours. Even non-perishable foods can't be 100% free of bacteria considering all the steps from farm to fork. They certainly reduce the chance of bacteria growth, but do not completely eliminate it.



KEEP COLD FOODS COLD

The best way to keep food cold is with an insulated lunch box along with freezer gel/ ice packs. A frozen, individual juice box can help serve as a cold pack. These measures will generally keep foods cold until your child's lunch time, but environmental variables, such as the container in direct sunlight, will reduce the time of effectiveness. Keep foods that need to be kept cold in your refrigerator as long as possible before moving to the lunch box. Leftovers from previous night's dinner are OK as long as that food was chilled within 2 hours of cooking and kept refrigerated overnight.

KEEP HOT FOODS HOT

Foods like soup, chili and stew need to stay hot. Use an insulated bottle stored in an insulated lunch box. Fill the bottle with boiling water to preheat it, let stand for a few minutes, empty, and then put in the hot food. Keep the insulated bottle closed until lunch to keep the food hot.

Keep hot food containers and cold food containers separate!

IT ALL STARTS IN THE KITCHEN

Start with clean hands, clean surfaces and wash all fruits and vegetables. Keep raw foods separate from cooked foods during the preparation stage. Make sure the container that the lunch will be in is clean as well. Make sure all containers clearly identify your child's lunch. It is best not to reuse packaging, plastic wrapping, bags, etc., from the previous day. Re-usable containers that have been properly washed and sanitized are fine. Pack moist towelettes and/or hand sanitizer but stress to your child that washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds is the best.

USE LOW RISK FOODS

Food items that are shelf stable that don't require refrigeration like crackers, pretzels, raisins and individual cans of fruit are good choices.

MINIMIZE LEFTOVERS

Pack just enough to be eaten during lunch and instruct your child to discard any leftover perishable items. After lunch, instruct your child to discard all used food packaging and bags.

For more food safety information, please visit
www.ncfoodsafety.com

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