

Packing a Safe School Lunch

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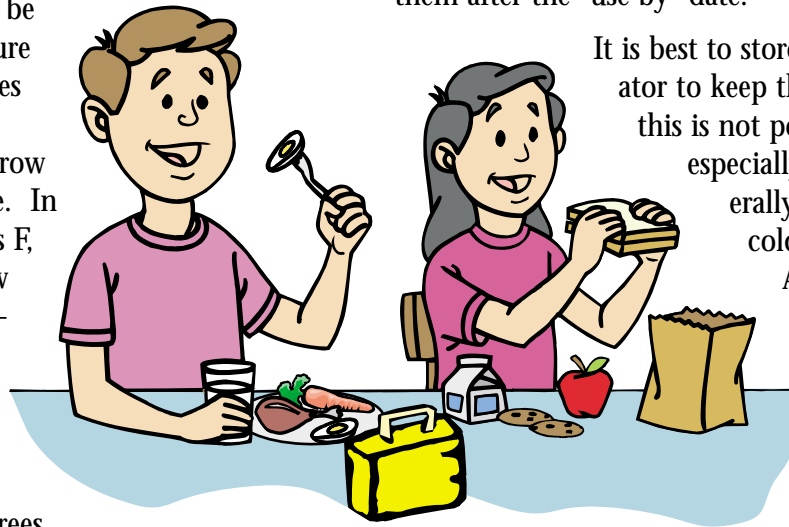
The lunches many children take to school may be the cause of stomach cramps, diarrhea, or even vomiting. Illness might be blamed on a flu bug when it might actually be caused by a “food bug.”

Packing a lunch that can be stored at room temperature and eaten hours later takes extra care. Bacteria that cause foodborne illness grow best at room temperature. In fact, at 40 to 140 degrees F, enough bacteria can grow in 2 hours to make a person sick.

Some foods should be kept either cold (40 degrees F or below) or hot (at or above 140 degrees F). These are perishable foods such as meats, poultry, seafood, eggs and dairy products (including yogurt). The key to packing a safe lunch is to keep cold foods cold, hot foods hot, and everything clean. Here’s why and how.

To grow, the bacteria that cause foodborne illness need the right temperature, moisture, and a food source such as protein. Any moist food that contains protein is susceptible to bacterial growth. If the food is handled a lot during preparation, there’s the extra risk of spreading germs from your hands to the food. That means there may be more risk of contamination with salads made from foods such as ham, chicken or egg salad.

If you choose cooked, ready-to-eat lunchmeats for a sandwich, pay attention to “use-by” dates on packages. These products may contain bacteria that can grow slowly at refrigerator temperatures. Do not use them after the “use by” date.



It is best to store lunches in a refrigerator to keep them cold, but often this is not possible. Lunch boxes, especially insulated ones, generally keep foods much colder than paper bags.

A commercial freezing gel, a container filled with ice, or a frozen drink packed with the food can help keep a lunch chilled.

Advise children to place their lunches in as cool a place as possible, never on a window ledge in the sun.

To keep foods hot for several hours, use a thermos designed for hot food. Bring the food to as high a temperature as possible before pouring it into the thermos. The food should still be hot to touch when eaten. After each use, wash the thermos well and rinse the inside with boiling water.

While preparing lunches, keep everything clean to avoid spreading bacteria. Be sure utensils, hands and work areas are clean. Wash food containers, including the thermos and the lunch box itself, after each use. Wrap foods in clean wrap. If you use brown paper

bags, buy bags made for that purpose. Grocery bags may be contaminated from insects or food leakage.

Some lunch foods don't need to be kept hot or cold to be safe. These foods include:

- peanut butter
- dry meats such as beef jerky
- some nonperishable cheeses and cheese spreads
- canned meat, poultry and seafood products (if eaten immediately after opening)
- dried fruits
- breads, cereals and nuts

Packaged, ready-to-eat foods in individual servings, such as canned fruits and puddings, make a nice addition to a school lunch.

Remember

Food that doesn't look, smell or taste bad might still be contaminated with enough bacteria to make you sick.

To pack a safe lunch, follow these guidelines:

- Keep everything clean when preparing and packing lunches.
- Plan a balanced menu of healthy foods that have been properly cooked. Don't use leftovers that have been in the refrigerator for a while.
- Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Don't allow these foods to remain at room temperature for more than 2 hours.
- Don't re-use perishable lunch leftovers. Throw them away.

Produced by Agricultural Communications, The Texas A&M University System
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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Chester P. Fehlis, Deputy Director, Texas Cooperative Extension, The Texas A&M University System.