

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Keep safety in mind when packing lunches

When my children don't like what's offered for school lunch, I pack a sandwich and they carry it in a brown paper bag. My kids say most of their friends use insulated bags when they bring their lunch. Is that necessary?

It depends on the sandwich. If it contains anything perishable — lunchmeat, for example — then you're taking a risk.

It may be hard to believe, but about 1 in 6 Americans gets food poisoning every year. While most cases aren't severe enough to be reported, about 128,000 people end up hospitalized.

The most frequent cause of foodborne illness, Salmonella, is responsible for about 42,000 reported cases annually, and almost half are infants and school-age children. Young children are generally more at risk than adults, so keep that in mind as you determine what to pack for lunch, and how to pack it. Bacteria multiply rapidly between 40 and 140 degrees F, so perishable foods shouldn't be kept at room temperature for more than two hours before being eaten.

Besides lunchmeat, perishable foods include eggs, yogurt, tofu, hummus, cut fruit and vegetables, and tuna, chicken or ham salad.

Perishable foods may be unsafe to eat by lunchtime, so using an insulated lunch box is recommended. Include a frozen gel pack or other cold source to ensure the food will remain below 40 degrees F until your child's lunchtime. In fact, the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends using at least two cold sources in insulated packs, such as a freezer pack and a frozen bottle of water or frozen juice box. By lunchtime, the beverages should be thawed and ready to drink.

If you want to avoid concern about keeping the



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lunch cold enough, pack only nonperishables. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich is a good example: Bread isn't perishable, and neither is peanut butter or jelly. Unopened canned tuna or chicken (or other canned meat and fish) are other options. Just pack a pouch or a can with a pop-top lid along with a fork or spoon, and your kids have their main course all set. Single-serving containers of fruit and pudding that you find on grocery store shelves (not the refrigerated section) are also safe at room temperature. Other items that are shelf-stable include whole fruits with a peel (think apples, oranges, bananas, plums and grapes), hard cheese, dried fruit, nuts, chips (look for healthier options), crackers, cereal bars and pickles.

It's also important to be sure to keep things clean. Before preparing pack lunches, wash counters, cutting boards and utensils with a clean dishrag and hot, soapy water, and wash your hands with soap and warm water for 20 seconds. Clean the insulated box or bag with hot soapy water after each use, and don't re-use paper bags. If you pack lunch the night before, keep it in the fridge with the lid open for proper cooling.

Talk with your children about leftovers. They should be discarded, and perishable items should never be eaten at a later time.

For more details on safe packed lunches, see www.foodsafety.gov/blog/2016/08/checklist.html.

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