

ShowMe Health

Subject: Bag Lunch Safety

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Publication date: August 18th, 2009

Whether it's off to school or work we go, millions of Americans carry "bag" lunches. Food brought from home can be kept safe if it is first handled and cooked safely. Then, perishable food must be kept cold until lunchtime.

Why keep food cold? Harmful bacteria multiply rapidly in the "danger zone" -- the temperatures between 40 and 140 °F. So, perishable food transported without an ice source won't stay safe long.

First of all, begin with safe food. Perishable food, such as raw or cooked meat and poultry, must be kept cold or frozen at the store and at home. Eggs should be purchased cold at the store and kept cold at home. In between, transport perishable food as fast as possible when no ice source is available. At the destination, it must be kept cold. Food should not be left out at room temperature more than 2 hours (1 hour if the temperature is above 90 °F).

Keep your preparation area clean, and foods separate. Wash your hands frequently, especially after coughing, sneezing, going to the bathroom, petting animals and so on.

Prepackaged combos that contain luncheon meats along with crackers, cheese, and condiments must also be kept refrigerated. This includes luncheon meats and smoked ham, which are cured or contain preservatives.

Pack just the amount of perishable food that can be eaten at lunch. That way, there won't be a problem about the storage or safety of leftovers.

It's fine to prepare the food the night before and store the packed lunch in the refrigerator. Freezing sandwiches helps them stay cold. However, for best quality, don't freeze sandwiches containing mayonnaise, lettuce, or tomatoes. Add these later.

Insulated, soft-sided lunch boxes or bags are best for keeping food cold, but metal or plastic lunch boxes and paper bags can also be used. If using paper lunch bags, create layers by double bagging to help insulate the food. An ice source should be packed with perishable food in any type of lunch bag or box.

To keep lunches cold away from home, include a small frozen gel pack or frozen juice box. Of course, if there's a refrigerator available, store perishable items there upon arrival.

Some food is safe without a cold source. Items that don't require refrigeration include fruits, vegetables, hard cheese, canned meat and fish, chips, breads, crackers, peanut butter, jelly, mustard, and pickles.

For hot lunches, use an insulated container to keep food like soup, chili, and stew hot. Fill the container with boiling water, let stand for a few minutes, empty, and then put in the piping hot food. Keep the insulated container closed until lunchtime to keep the food hot – 140 °F or above.

When using the microwave oven to reheat lunches, cover food to hold in moisture and promote safe, even heating. Reheat leftovers to at least 165 °F. Food should be steaming hot. Cook frozen convenience meals according to package instructions.

These tips may seem like a hassle, especially since many of us follow the 'ten second rule' with food, but one episode of food poisoning can be devastating. Protect yourself and your family by following simple food safety precautions when preparing sack lunches.

For questions or more information about food safety, call the health center at 646-5506 and ask to speak to Richard Smith.

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