

Bag Lunch Safety

Whether it is students taking lunch to school or adults packing lunch for work, millions will take “bag” lunches with them each day and will want to make sure their food is safe to eat. Follow these safety tips to avoid foodborne illnesses when eating from a lunch box or bag.

KEEP FOODS CLEAN

Keep everything clean when packing the lunch. That not only goes for the food, but also food preparation surfaces, hands and utensils. Use hot, soapy water. Keep family pets away from kitchen counters. Wash your hands before you prepare or eat food.

KEEP FOODS OUT OF DANGER ZONE

Bacteria grow and multiply rapidly in the danger zone between 40 °F and 140 °F. Keep lunches out of direct sunlight and away from radiators or other heat sources. Some foods that don't require refrigeration and are great to include in a bag lunch are fruits, vegetables, hard cheese, unopened canned meat or fish, chips, bread, crackers, peanut butter, jelly, mustard and pickles.

KEEP COLD FOODS COLD

The best way to keep food cold is with an insulated box. When packing lunches, include either freezer gel packs or cold food items such as small frozen juice packs. Nestle perishable meat, poultry or egg sandwiches between these cold items. Sandwiches can also be made ahead of time and kept refrigerated or frozen before placing in the lunch box.

Freezer gel packs will hold cold food until lunch-time, but generally will not work for all-day storage. Any perishable leftovers after lunch should be discarded and not brought home. Of course, if

there's a refrigerator at work, store perishable items there upon arrival. Leftover perishables that have been kept refrigerated should be safe to take home. Brown paper bags or plastic lunch bags can also be used to store foods if you are not carrying perishable foods, but they do not work as well for cold foods. The bag tends to become soggy or leak as cold foods thaw, and the bags do not retain the cold as well as an insulated lunch box. If a freezer gel pack is being used in the paper bag, it will cause additional moisture as it melts. Wrap the freezer pack in plastic or foil and use an extra paper bag to create a double layer to help solve the problem.

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, let stand for a few minutes, empty and then put in the piping hot food. Keep the insulated bottle closed until lunch to keep the foods hot.

GUIDELINES FOR A NUTRITIOUS BAG LUNCH

- Use a variety of foods from the major food groups.
- Keep calories in mind. Fats and sugars can quickly add more calories than you need. Lunchtime beverages and desserts are two possible sources of extra sugars and fats.
- Use only small amounts of high-fat foods, such as butter, margarine, mayonnaise, sour cream or fatty meats.
- Include foods with dietary fiber, such as fruits, vegetables and whole-grain breads.
- Choose low-sodium foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, lean meat, and poultry.

BROWN BAG BEVERAGES

Beverages not only quench your thirst, but some add important nutrients to your lunch. Therefore, consider not only taste but also nutrient content when you choose a beverage for your bag lunch.

- Lowfat and skim milk supply protein, calcium, riboflavin and energy (calories).
- Fruit juices that are 100 percent juice supply vitamins, minerals and energy. Vegetable juices also supply important nutrients, but the sodium content may be very high. Balance these with low-sodium foods.
- Fruit drinks, punches and ades are often fortified with nutrients, but sugar may also be very high in these drinks. Twelve ounces of fruit drink, ade or punch often contain corn syrup and other sugars equal to about 12 teaspoons of table sugar. Fruit-flavored drinks may contain very little or no fruit juice at all.
- Beverages labeled “orange soda” or “grape soda” are soft drinks and may not contain any fruit juices.
- Regular soft drinks supply mainly energy since they contain large amounts of sugars. For example, 12 ounces of cola contain corn syrup and other sugars equal to about 9 teaspoons of table sugar.
- Diet soda, black coffee and plain tea have few calories or nutrients.

PACKING A SCHOOL LUNCH BOX

A national survey has shown that children who buy hot lunches at school generally have a more nutritious lunch than children who take their lunch. To make the lunch you put in your child’s lunch box tempting as well as more nutritious, consider these tips.

- Create interest by having your child assist in food shopping and preparing lunch. Let your child make his own sandwich.
- Use a variety of foods for more nutrients and to avoid monotony.
- Keep sandwiches simple — sliced turkey rather than turkey salad, for example — especially if your child objects to mixtures.
- Select and prepare foods that are appropriate for your child’s age. For example, slices of fresh apple or pear are ideal for the younger child, while whole fruit is fine for older children. (Treat cut edges with orange or lemon juice to prevent them from turning brown.)
- Offer foods of different shapes and textures.
- Pack cookies or cupcakes that supply vitamins or minerals as well as energy — for example, oatmeal-applesauce cookies, fig bars and pumpkin cupcakes.
- Include one of your child’s favorite foods even if it tends to contain a little more sugar, sodium or fat than you think he needs. Balance foods that contain more sugar, fat and/or sodium with foods that contain less of these components at other meals.

Sources:

1. USDA/FSIS. *USDA Offers Advice for Packing Safe School Lunches*. [WWW.document]. URL <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/oa/news/.htm>
2. USDA/FSIS (1998) *Safe Food to go* [WWW document]. URL <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/oa/pubs/foodtogo.htm>

This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by P.H. Schmutz, HGIC Information Specialist and E.H. Hoyle, Extension Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University.

This information is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service is implied. All recommendations are for South Carolina conditions and may not apply to other areas. (New 1/99)