



Packing Safe Lunches

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

Why Keep Food Cold?

Harmful bacteria multiply rapidly in the "Danger Zone" – temperatures between 40 and 140°F. Therefore, perishable food transported without an ice source won't stay safe long. Here are safe handling recommendations to prevent foodborne illness from bag lunches.

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. Food shouldn't be left out at room temperature more than 2 hours (1 hour if above 90°F).

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

Keep Everything Clean

Wash your hands with soap and warm water before you prepare or eat food. Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and countertops with hot, soapy water after preparing each food item and before you go onto the next item.

Don't Cross-Contaminate

At lunchtime, discard all used food packaging and paper bags. Do not reuse packaging because it could contaminate other food and cause foodborne illness.

Packing Lunches

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.

Insulated, soft-sided lunch boxes or bags are best for keeping food cold. 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.

Keeping Cold Lunches Cold

Prepare cooked food, such as turkey, ham, chicken, and vegetable or pasta salads, ahead of time to allow for thorough chilling in the refrigerator. Keep cooked food refrigerated until time to leave.

To keep lunches cold away from home, include a small frozen gel pack or frozen juice box. If there's a refrigerator available, use it.

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

Keeping Hot Lunches Hot

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

Microwave Cooking/Reheating

When using the microwave 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.



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