



County of Sacramento

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Food Safety Tips for Bag Lunches

Keep your kids safe and healthy as they head back to school

Did you know your child's bag or box lunch can be unsafe to eat by lunchtime? When food is unrefrigerated for extended periods of time, bacteria can grow and multiply increasing the risk of foodborne illness.

Food brought from home can be kept safe if it is handled, prepared and packed safely. Below are some food safety tips from Sacramento County's Environmental Management Department to help you get an A+ when preparing "bag" lunches for your little scholars.

Keep Everything Clean

Wash your hands, cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and countertops before you prepare your child's lunch. A solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach in 1 gallon of water may be used to sanitize surfaces and utensils. Don't forget to thoroughly wash plastic and metal lunch bags and boxes after each use.

Packing Lunches

Soft, insulated lunch bags or boxes are the best choice for keeping lunches cold, but metal or plastic lunch boxes and paper bags can also be used. If you use paper lunch bags, double bagging creates an additional layer of insulation to help protect the food inside. An ice source should be packed with perishable food in any type of lunch bag or box.

Keeping Cold Lunches Cold

The very nature of bag lunches makes it nearly impossible to keep food properly refrigerated. Sandwiches prepared with cooked meats such as cold cuts, pre-made tuna salads, chicken salads and egg salads are potential targets for the bacteria that cause food poisoning, and they must be kept refrigerated.

And it's not just homemade sandwiches that need refrigeration. Any store-bought, packaged lunch combo containing lunch meats, crackers and cheese need to be kept cold too.

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

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Keeping Hot Lunches Hot

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.

Choose Lunch Foods Wisely

Remember peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches? Because bread, peanut butter and jelly are all non-perishable, peanut butter and jelly makes the perfect sandwich for brown-bag lunches. Other food items that don't require refrigeration include whole fruits and vegetables, hard cheese, canned meat and fish (unopened until served), chips, breads, crackers, mustard, and pickles.

When in Doubt, Throw it Out!

Many parents choose to prepare bag lunches for their children to economize. When we're trying to be frugal, it can be tempting to reuse paper lunch bags, sandwich bags, foil and plastic wrap. Unfortunately, once these items have been used, they can contaminate other food and cause foodborne illness. The safest thing to do is to discard them.

If your child brings home leftovers that were left unrefrigerated, follow one of the mantras of the foodservice industry: "When in doubt, throw it out."

For more information on "bag" lunch food safety, visit these websites:

http://www.fsis.usda.gov/factsheets/Keeping_Bag_Lunches_Safe/index.asp

<http://www.foodsafety.gov/keep/events/backtoschool/>

<http://homefoodsafety.org/pages/tips/tips/lunchbox.jsp>

Visit the Sacramento County Environmental Management Department website at www.emd.saccounty.net or call (916) 875-8440.

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