

Keeping “Bag” Lunches Safe

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. Perishable food must be kept cold (below 40°F) to prevent bacteria from growing. Here are safe handling recommendations to prevent foodborne illness from “bag” lunches.

Begin with Safe Food

Keep raw or cooked meat and poultry, eggs, cheese, milk, luncheon meats and other perishable foods cold. These foods spoil easily and should not be left out at room temperature more than 2 hours (1 hour if the temperature is above 90°F). Prepackaged combos that contain luncheon meats along with crackers, cheese, and condiments must also be kept refrigerated.

Keep Everything Clean

Wash your hands 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 on to the next item. A solution of 1 teaspoon of bleach in 1 quart of water may be used to sanitize surfaces and utensils. Keep family pets away from kitchen counters.

Don’t Cross-Contaminate

Harmful bacteria can spread throughout the kitchen and get onto cutting boards, utensils, and countertops. Always use a clean cutting board and keep raw meats away from foods that will not be cooked, such as tomatoes and lettuce. Use one cutting board for fresh produce and a separate one for meat and poultry.



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. Add these later.

Insulated, soft-sided lunch boxes or bags are best for keeping food cold. An ice source should be packed with perishable food in any type of lunch bag or box.

Keeping Cold Lunches Cold, Hot Lunches Hot

To keep lunches cold away from home, include a small frozen gel pack or frozen juice box. If there’s a refrigerator available, store perishable items there upon arrival. For hot lunches such as chili, soup and stew, use an insulated container to keep food hot.

Some food is safe at room temperature, such as fruits, vegetables, hard cheese, canned meat and fish, chips, breads, crackers, peanut butter, jelly, mustard, and pickles.

Microwave Cooking/Reheating

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.

