



Brown Bag Safety: Packing a Safe School Lunch

Millions of people bring “bag” lunches to school and work every day because they are quick, convenient, and inexpensive. Bag lunches should be safe and healthy, but because they have to sit on a desk or in a locker for several hours before eating, steps should be taken to keep food safe and prevent foodborne illness. It is important to keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot, and be aware of the food temperature “danger zone”. The “danger zone” is the temperature between 40 and 140° F, the perfect temperature for harmful bacteria to grow rapidly and potentially cause illness. Recent studies have shown that only about 1% of cold food items in children’s sack lunches were found to be at a safe temperature before eaten.

Here are some recommendations to help keep you and your child safe and prevent illness from “bag” lunches:

- **Keep everything clean** when packing the lunch. Use hot, soapy water to clean hands, clean preparation surfaces, and clean utensils. Wash your hands before you prepare or eat food. Wash insulated lunch bags with warm soapy water after each use.
- **Use an insulated lunch box** to help keep foods cold. Insulated, soft-sided lunch totes are best for keeping cold foods cold. You can also use a thermos to keep milk or juice cold until lunchtime. Cold foods should not be out of refrigeration for more than two hours.
- **Use freezer gel packs** that are widely available in stores. If you cannot get freezer gel packs, freeze a juice box or plastic water bottle overnight and put that into your lunch box next to your sandwich.
- **Keep your lunch in the coolest place possible!** If there is a refrigerator that can be used, put your lunch in there. If not, keep it out of the sun and away from the heat.
- **Pack foods that can be kept at room temperature**, especially if you have a brown paper bag lunch. These room temperature foods include whole fruits (apples, oranges, and bananas); vegetables such as carrots; whole grain snack crackers; peanut, cashew, or almond butter with 100% fruit spread on whole grain bread; canned meats such as tuna; and canned fruits and juices without added sugars or sodium. Dried fruits such as raisins and cranberries are a good alternative to cookies and candies to satisfy a sweet tooth.
- **Rinse fresh fruits and vegetables** under running tap water, including those with skins and rinds that are not eaten. Blot dry with a paper towel before packing them.
- **Use a thermos** to keep soup, chili, and stew hot. To keep hot foods hot, fill an insulated bottle or thermos with boiling water, let stand for a few minutes, empty, and then put in the piping hot food. Keep the insulated bottle or thermos closed and stored in an insulated lunch box until lunch.
- **Wash hands before eating lunch.** Hands should be washed for at least 20 seconds, about the time it takes to sing two choruses of the “Happy Birthday” song, with warm, soapy water. Include a moist towelette and hand sanitizer in your child’s lunch box as a back up to washing with warm, soapy water. Hand sanitizer can be used by itself if hands look clean, but the towelette should be used to remove any visible dirt before using the hand sanitizer.
- **Discard leftovers that should remain cold** after lunch. Pack room temperature food items such as whole wheat pretzels or whole fruits for a healthy afternoon snack. Discard all food packaging once it has been used since bacteria can grow on plastic bags, aluminum foil, and paper. Only pack enough food that can be eaten at lunchtime. Leftovers that are stored for the rest of the day and then brought home may not be safe to eat.



Foodborne illness remains a major public threat in the U. S. and can significantly impact the health and well-being of young children. Each year, an estimated 48 million cases of foodborne illness occur in the U. S. Most of these cases are mild and cause symptoms for only a day or two; however, some are more serious, resulting in approximately 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths. People at highest risk of being affected by foodborne illness are the elderly, children, individuals with a weakened immune system, and pregnant women. Persons in these high-risk groups should be especially careful to prevent foodborne illness. Washing your hands with soap and water before and after preparing food and before eating, along with other food safety steps, can help prevent getting sick from a foodborne illness.