

## **Pack a Safe Lunch**

A good lunch can quickly go bad if not properly packed. Without proper storage, perishable food is at risk for harmful bacteria that can cause foodborne illness. Bacteria grows rapidly if food is held in the “danger zone” of 40°F to 135°F for over 2 hours (1 hour when the temperature is above 90°F).

To serve safe food in carried lunches, the food must start safe. Packed lunches and snacks can be kept safe by following the USDA’s four steps to food safety: Clean, Separate, Cook, and Chill.

Pathogens that cause illness can spread around your kitchen and survive in many places. Start by washing your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water before, during, and after preparing food and before eating. Always wash your hands after handling uncooked meat, poultry, seafood, flour, or eggs.

Clean and sanitize surfaces and utensils after preparing each food item. To sanitize surfaces and utensils in the kitchen, use a bleach-based solution of one Tablespoon of unscented liquid bleach and one gallon of water.

Rinse fruits and vegetables under running water without soap, bleach, or commercial produce washes. Do not wash meat, poultry, eggs, or seafood to avoid spreading harmful germs around your kitchen.

Food safety is not just about the food. The lunch bag itself can harbor dangerous bacteria if not regularly cleaned.

When grocery shopping or restocking your fridge, keep raw meat, seafood, poultry, and their juices away from other foods. Make sure to store these items on the lowest shelf in the fridge.

Use one cutting board or plate for raw meats and a separate cutting board or plate for other foods that are ready to eat and will not be cooked.

When cooking, it is essential to use a food thermometer so that all foods are cooked to a safe internal temperature.

It is important to prepare just the amount of perishable food that will be eaten during lunch to reduce the possibility of that food being consumed as leftovers.

Never thaw or marinate meat, seafood, or poultry on the counter. The safest way is to thaw it in the fridge.

Higher-risk foods should not be used in a lunch that will sit at room temperature for more than a few hours.

High-risk foods include meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, tofu, dairy products, opened canned fruit, cooked fruits and vegetables, cut/peeled fresh fruits and vegetables, pasta, and rice.

Safe foods to pack for room temperature storage include peanut butter sandwiches; popcorn; bread; crackers; unpeeled and uncut fresh fruit; unopened single-serving containers of fruit, fruit

juice, and pudding; commercially prepared meats, poultry, seafood, and dried beans which can be opened and eaten immediately; dried fruits; nuts; cookies; cereal bars, and granola bars.

Using an insulated lunch bag instead of a paper bag when packing perishable food is critical. To keep the insulated bag cold, consider storing it in the freezer overnight to ensure it is as cold as possible before packing a lunch. If the lunch is packed in advance, keep the entire bag in the refrigerator until it is time to leave.

To maintain a cold temperature until lunchtime, keep at least two cold sources in an insulated lunch bag. Place the most perishable food closest to the cold sources.

Store lunches containing cold perishable foods in a refrigerator until lunchtime. When refrigeration is not possible, keep your lunch out of direct sunlight.

Throwing away any trash and food scraps immediately after lunch will help keep the lunch bag clean from any bacteria.

The four easy steps of “Clean, Separate, Cook, and Chill” will help protect you and your family from foodborne illness.

(Sources: [www.foodsafety.gov](http://www.foodsafety.gov); [www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov))