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Back-to-school food safety tips

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Students will soon be heading back to school, and many of them will be carrying lunches packed at home. Lisa Wydra, UW Extension-Sawyer County/Lac Courte Oreilles, Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program Coordinator, has some tips to help ensure that your child's home-packed lunches are always safe to eat.

Wash your hands and areas used to prepare food.

- Clean your hands with warm, soapy water before you prepare food.
- Make sure countertops and utensils are clean before you start, and wash with hot, soapy water at the end of the process.
- Use clean bags and packaging.
- Talk to school administrators to be sure children have enough time at school to wash their hands before and after eating.

Keep items separate from each other.

- Use one cutting board for fresh produce and another for meat and poultry to avoid cross-contamination.
- Do not reuse packaging because it might contaminate other food and cause illness. After eating lunch, discard all food packaging and paper bags.

Keep lunches cold.

- Keeping food cold slows the growth of bacteria. Harmful bacterial can multiply rapidly in the "Danger Zone"—temperatures between 40–140 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Prepare cooked food, such as turkey, ham, chicken and vegetable or pasta salads in advance and chill them thoroughly (to 40 degrees or lower).
- Keep perishable food refrigerated until you're ready to leave home.
- Use an insulated, soft-sided bag to keep foods cold and make sure you can clean the bag both inside and out.

- Add two cold sources, such as a frozen gel pack or frozen juice box, with perishable food inside an insulated lunch bag or box. Pick up a few extra ice packs or cold sources at the store and keep extras in the freezer.
- Store perishable items in a refrigerator (if available) immediately upon arrival at school.
- Refrigerate prepackaged combos that contain perishable foods such as luncheon meats, cheese and cut fruit.
- Consider including items that don't require refrigeration such as whole fruits and vegetables, hard cheese, canned meat and fish, chips, breads, crackers, peanut butter, jelly, mustard and pickles.

Keep hot foods hot.

- An insulated container should keep food hot—at a temperature of 140 degrees Fahrenheit or above.
- If the lunch box your child uses has a thermos, test it out at home to be sure it will keep food hot (above 140 degrees) till lunch time.
- Cook frozen convenience meals according to the package directions. Include standing time if you're using a microwave oven.

It's OK to prepare food for a bag lunch the night before, but don't pack the lunches until you're ready to leave home, says Wydra. And only pack the amount of perishable food that can be eaten at lunchtime. Discard all leftovers, including packaging that could contaminate other food or cause illness.

To learn more about food safety, contact Sawyer County UW-Extension office or www.befoodsafe.org. You can also chat live with a USDA food safety specialist in English or Spanish at *Ask Karen*.