



Central Office: 505 Silas Deane Highway, Wethersfield, CT 06109 Phone (860) 721-2822 Fax (860) 721-2823
Berlin: 240 Kensington Road, Berlin, CT 06037 Phone (860) 828-7017 Fax (860) 828-9248
Newington: 131 Cedar Street, Newington, CT 06111 Phone (860) 665-8586 Fax (860) 665-8533
Rocky Hill: 761 Old Main Street, Rocky Hill, CT 06067 Phone (860) 258-2770 Fax (860) 258-2767

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Feed Students, Not Bacteria, with School Lunches

Whether or not parents look forward to seeing the return of the yellow school buses each fall, one task many of us may not relish is making school lunches. As in all food preparation and storage, care must be taken to ensure that the food we pack is not only nutritious, but also safe to eat.

One of the main concerns in ensuring the safety of packed lunches is the issue of temperature. As is always the case, it is imperative that hot foods are kept hot and cold foods are kept cold. Otherwise, bacteria will multiply quickly and cause food-borne illness. Back-to-school shopping lists should include freezer gel packs, insulated bottles, and insulated lunchboxes or bags.

To keep hot foods such as chili hot, fill an insulated bottle with boiling water for a few minutes, then empty the water and add the heated food. Cold perishable foods should be packed in insulated bags or lunchboxes with at least one freezer gel pack. Making lunches the night before and keeping them in the refrigerator or freezer over-night provides additional protection. Frozen sandwiches and packaged drinks usually thaw completely by lunchtime, and the frozen drink can also keep the lunch cold in the same way that a frozen gel pack does. (Remember to add lettuce, tomatoes, mayonnaise later, as they should not be frozen.)

Additional items to be included in back-to-school shopping are a variety of nonperishable foods. Examples include canned fruit or puddings with pop-top lids, peanut butter, jams, and crackers. Unopened bottled water and 100% fruit juice can be safely stored at room temperature, and whole fresh fruits such as apples, oranges, and bananas do not require refrigeration. However, cut up fruit must be kept cold, as well as the pre-packaged lunches that include meat, cheese, and condiments. Be sure a frozen gel pack is included in the lunch box to keep cold foods cold.

Before packing lunches, cleanliness is a must. Wash hands, food preparation surfaces, and utensils with warm, soapy water. Remember to wash lunchboxes, insulated bags and bottles, and freezer packs before using, and wash them again after each use. Wash all raw fruits and vegetables, and handle other perishables like lunch meat and cheese carefully. Wrap cold foods in plastic tightly, and be sure to throw away used food packaging and paper bags to avoid contaminating other food.

Instruct your child to try to store his or her lunch away from sources of heat and out of direct sunlight at school. Remind them to wash their hands before eating, and tell them it is important that anything perishable that is left from lunch must be discarded and not saved for a later time. Even the freezer gel packs can only keep food safe for a few hours and will not last all day. And pack a straw or cup for your child to use to eliminate drinking from the beverage container. For after-school snacking, pack non-perishable items such as raisins, granola, crackers, or cookies.

While insulated, soft-sided lunch boxes or bags are preferred for keeping foods cold, metal or plastic lunch boxes or paper bags can also be used safely if a few measures are taken. When using paper bags, double bag the lunch to provide extra insulation. Whether using paper, plastic, or metal, be sure to include a frozen gel

pack to keep food cold. Wrap the gel pack in plastic to protect the lunch from moisture. At the end of the day, all paper bags should be thrown away and all other types of lunch containers should be washed so they will be clean for the next day.

It is okay to pack lunches the night before they are needed as long as they are refrigerated. Keep in mind that food should not be left out at room temperature for more than two hours; if the temperature is over 90⁰ F., food should not be left out in the room for over one hour.

School days are long, and most students really look forward to lunchtime to be re-energized. Packing a nutritious, safe meal provides them with the fuel they need that has been prepared specifically with them in mind. For further information about packing school lunches, contact the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the USDA at 1-888-674-6854, or go to the USDA web site at www.fsis.usda.gov. The partnership for Food Safety at www.fightbac.org is also helpful. In addition, the Central Connecticut Health District has videos and brochures about food safety and other public health issues; call 860-721-2822 or visit the Health District online at www.ccthd.org.

