Lunches from home

Tips for Food Preparation, Storage and Handling

What is food poisoning?
Most foods contain micro-organisms (germs), and some foods may contain food poisoning micro-organisms. These may be naturally present or may result from contact with other environmental sources such as soil, air, and hands.

If food is not prepared, stored and transported correctly, these micro-organisms can multiply to dangerous levels. Food poisoning occurs when micro-organisms are present in large numbers, contaminating food that is then consumed.

It is estimated that there are around 5.4 million cases of food-borne illness in Australia each year. It is therefore important for parents and carers to practise basic food safety when preparing and packing lunches for children to take to school.

How can parents and carers reduce the risk of food-borne illness from packed lunches?

• Avoid including food in lunches that would normally be kept in refrigerators, especially during summer months.

• If such food is included (e.g. ham, yoghurt, dairy products, fish, rice, etc.) then use an insulated lunchbox or bag. A frozen drink bottle or freezer brick will help maintain a safe temperature.

• Avoid foods that have just been cooked but not yet cooled (e.g. boiled eggs). It is important that these foods are cooled in the refrigerator before being packed for lunch.

• Avoid the use of leftovers in school lunches.

• Discard any leftover school lunch food and do not re-use.

• Do not only rely on your senses (i.e. smell) to judge whether food is “off” or not.

• And remember if in doubt, throw it out.

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Tips for the home

Food Storage
- Always check that the fridge temperature is set to 5°C or below.
- Use clean food containers to store food.
- Cover food with tight-fitting lids, foil or plastic wrap to prevent deterioration and contamination.
- Refrigerate or freeze foods soon after purchase.
- Keep hot foods at 60°C or above and cold foods at 5°C or below.
- Keep cooked and ready-to-eat foods separate from raw foods to prevent cross-contamination. Store raw meat below ready-to-eat foods and make sure that juices do not drip onto other foods.
- Transfer any remaining canned food to clean containers and store in the refrigerator.
- Store food items away from toxic chemicals such as insect sprays, cleaning agents and pest control products.
- Regularly check expiry dates of food in pantry and use food on a ‘first in-first out basis’.

Food Preparation
- Use separate chopping boards and utensils for raw and cooked foods or ready-to-eat foods. If this is not possible, ensure they are washed thoroughly in hot soapy water and dried before re-use.
- Wash hands immediately after handling raw foods and before handling cooked or ready-to-eat foods.
- Wash fruits and vegetables before use. Wash all produce e.g. apples, oranges, grapes etc.
- Thaw frozen food before cooking and never refreeze food that has been thawed.

Food Hygiene
- Wash hands and nails thoroughly before and after preparing foods, after visiting toilet, after using a tissue, coughing or sneezing, handling garbage, touching animals, hair and other body parts.
- Hands should be washed with soap and warm running water for at least 20 seconds, then dried with a clean towel.
- Use clean equipment e.g. tongs, spoons etc, rather than hands to pick up cooked or ready-to-eat food.

This information sheet was last updated in July 2009.

For more information, please go to www.health.act.gov.au