

# Pack a Safe Lunch

## Extension Nutrition and Food Science Program

Taking your lunch to school or work is a great way to save money. It is also a good way to use leftovers from last night's dinner.

When packing a lunch that will be eaten several hours later, remember these food safety tips so the lunch you pack doesn't make you or your family sick.

### Don't get bugged by your lunch

Keeping bacteria away from your food can greatly lower your chance of getting a foodborne illness.

Follow these guidelines to help prevent bacteria from spreading:

- Always wash your hands with soap and warm water before preparing lunch.
- Clean all food-preparation areas, including the countertops.
- Rinse fresh fruits and vegetables under running tap water before packing them in the lunch. This includes produce that has skins and rinds that will not be eaten.



### Keep hot foods **HOT**, cold foods **COLD**.

Bacteria that cause foodborne illness grow best at temperatures between 40 and 140 degrees F. This is known as the temperature danger zone.

To slow bacterial growth, keep perishable foods out of the temperature danger zone until it is time to eat.

Perishable foods include meat, cheese, eggs, poultry, milk and other dairy foods, and fresh-cut fruit and vegetables. Do not leave perishable foods at room temperature for more than 2 hours, or 1 hour if the outdoor temperature is 90 degrees F or above.

**COLD:** Keep cold foods cold, including meat, eggs, lunch meat, cheese, milk, and cut fruit, and cooked pasta, vegetables, and rice. Use ice packs, freezer gels, or frozen juice boxes to keep the foods cold until lunch.

**HOT:** Use a wide-mouth insulated bottle to keep foods such as soup and chili hot. Pour boiling water into the bottle to heat the inside. Then heat the food

to 165 degrees F. Drain the boiling water from the bottle and replace with the hot food.

If you are worried about keeping perishable foods out of the danger zone, consider packing foods that can be stored safely at room temperature:

- Nuts
- Peanut butter
- Juice boxes
- Unopened canned meat
- Beef jerky
- Dried and canned fruit
- Chips
- Whole fruit
- Breads and cereals
- Jam, jelly, and honey

### ***Other tips***

Keep lunch boxes clean. Wash them with soap and warm water after each use.

If you use paper bags, only use those labeled for lunch use. Plastic bags from grocery and other stores



*Freshly cut fruit spoils quicker than whole fruit.*



can become contaminated and should not be used to carry lunches. Do not reuse plastic bags or wrap.

Keep lunches out of direct sunlight or other heat sources.

Throw away any leftover perishable foods. Do not save them for a later meal or the next day's lunch.

Use only the leftovers that have been in the refrigerator for less than 1 or 2 days.

### ***Acknowledgment***

*Peggy Van Laanen, former Extension Specialist, wrote the original manuscript for this publication.*

*Produced by AgriLife Communications, the Texas A&M System*

Extension publications can be found on the Web at <http://agrilifebookstore.org>  
Visit the Texas AgriLife Extension Service at <http://AgriLifeExtension.tamu.edu>

Educational programs of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age or national origin.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Edward G. Smith, Director, the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, Texas A&M System.