

Back to School**How to Avoid the Lunch Bag Blues****Safe Lunches**

Food-borne illness is usually caused by eating foods that contain large numbers of harmful bacteria or the toxins they produce. Bacteria grow very well in warm, moist foods such as meat, eggs, milk and poultry and multiply rapidly at room temperature. Packed lunches are often kept for four to six hours at this temperature.

Safe Foods

Lunches can be made safe by choosing foods that remain safe at room temperature or by keeping cold food cold and hot foods hot.

Foods that can be kept at room temperature are:

- nuts and peanut butter
- fresh fruits and vegetables, dry fruit
- canned fruits or meats
- dry or hard cheese, yogurt
- dry processed meats, such as jerky and pepperoni (but not bologna, hot dogs, etc.)
- packaged puddings
- jam, honey, fruit pies
- crackers, cakes or cookies

You should keep a supply of these shelf-stable foods for easy packing.

Keep Cold Foods Cold

Make sure perishable foods are kept cold. This can be done by

- making sandwiches with cold ingredients the night before and keeping refrigerated until packing to go. Freezing the sandwich is also a good way to keep it cold.
- using an insulated lunch bag or box with a reusable ice gel pack. If you use a brown bag, Frozen individual juice boxes work well — the juice will be thawed by lunch and keep the



food cold. Be sure to include freezer gel packs and double bag.

- keeping lunches out of direct sunlight and away from radiators, baseboards, or other heat sources found in the classroom. Any perishable foods not eaten at lunch should be discarded.

Keep Hot Foods Hot

Hot soups, stews or chilies make hearty lunches — but make sure they are kept hot.

- Heat foods to boiling and put into a preheated thermos bottle (to preheat bottle, fill first with boiling water, let stand for at least two minutes, then empty and refill with hot food). Keep container tightly closed until lunch.

Microwaving

If foods are to be heated later in a microwave, make sure that

- the food is kept cold until it is time to reheat it.
- only microwave-safe containers are used during heating.
- the food is rotated so that it is evenly heated.
- the food is thoroughly cooked.

Prevent Contamination

As important as controlling growth of bacteria, is making sure that you do not allow bacteria to contaminate the food. You can do this by

- washing your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water before preparing the lunch. Teach your children to wash their hands before eating.
- making sure all containers, cutting boards and utensils are thoroughly cleaned and sanitized after each use.
- washing fruits and vegetables before packing them in the lunch. If using canned products, wash the top lid to ensure it is clean.
- checking all packaged or canned foods and discarding any leaking or swollen cans, or broken packaging that exposes food.

For further information on food safety, visit the Nova Scotia Department of Environment and Climate Change website at <http://novascotia.ca/nse/>