



Environmental Health

A Guide to the Preparation of Packed Lunches

Introduction

Home prepared packed lunches now provide the midday meal for large numbers of school children and adults. Whether we consume these meals in winter or summer, the selection of food commodities, methods of preparation and storage are vitally important.

The guidelines contained in this leaflet are designed to assist you in the safe and hygienic preparation of packed meals.

Bacteria

All foods will contain some germs (bacteria) but cooking normally kills them off. You don't usually cook a sandwich, so it is important that the number of bacteria is kept to a minimum. Clearly some foods are more susceptible to bacterial problems than others. High-risk foods, i.e. those that are high in protein, can be perfect breeding grounds, particularly if there is sufficient moisture and warmth to enable bacteria to grow.

The following are a few tips on how to buy, prepare and store safe food.

Purchasing Food

When you go shopping use a cool bag to carry home your high-risk foods, including frozen and chilled foods. If you can, try to purchase these food commodities last. Do not leave high-risk foods for long periods in a warm car. Ensure when buying food that you check the 'use by' or 'best before' dates.

Remember you may be preparing food to eat at a later date and so you will need to bear this in mind. **Always use food within the recommended dates.**

Immediately you arrive home, place all high-risk foods into the fridge/freezer units, having first separated raw and cooked foods to prevent cross-contamination from occurring.

Personal Hygiene

The hands are a potential source of food contamination. Always wash your hands before you start food preparation in the kitchen, and do not handle food more than necessary. Never dip your fingers in food to taste, and if you leave the kitchen always wash your hands before starting to handle food again, particularly after visiting the toilet. Remember to cover all cuts and open wounds on the hands with a clean waterproof dressing.

Food Preparation

Together with personal hygiene, kitchen hygiene is equally important when you are preparing a packed lunch.

The golden rule is 'clean as you work'. This will go a long way to preventing the spread of germs from one area to another. Use a clean knife and chopping board. Just as you wash your hands between preparing raw and cooked foods, it is equally important to wash and dry the knives, chopping boards and other utensils you use between separate ingredients.

Fruit and Salad Items

Wash fruit and salad items thoroughly in cold running water and remember to keep unwashed items away from cooked fillings.

Meat and Poultry

Always cook meat and poultry thoroughly ensuring that the juices run clear. Cool quickly (**Do not leave it in a warm room overnight**) and place under refrigeration until required for preparation. Don't cook fillings such as chicken too far in advance. Cook the ingredients as and when required.

Eggs

Vulnerable people, such as the elderly, the sick, babies, pregnant women and young children should have eggs hard boiled (never

undercooked). Cook the eggs in their shells for ten minutes at least from a start in boiling water then refresh under cold running water. If high temperatures or a long cooking time are used to cook eggs, iron in the yolk and sulphur compounds in the white are released to form a blackish ring around the yolk. Stale eggs will also show a black ring around the yolk. If you are intending to make egg sandwiches, then always mix eggs with proprietary brand salad cream or mayonnaise, as it will make the filling more acidic and so discourage germs from growing.

Packed Lunch Containers

The containers used to store the packed lunch should be capable of being easily cleaned. Don't re-use polythene bags or food wrappings such as foil or cling film. A strong plastic container such as an ice-cream tub is ideal, as it can be washed repeatedly and easily dried. Alternatively a cool bag may be used.

Storage of Packed Lunches

The storage of packed lunches is very important. Prepared sandwiches and rolls must be kept cool. If they have been prepared the night before, the packed lunch should be stored in the refrigerator until needed. Make sure the refrigerator is working properly; it should be below 8°C, (ideally below 5°C) where the food is stored.

Some sandwich fillings, such as cheese, chicken, sausage and tuna, can be stored in the freezer overnight. Some foods are unsuitable for chilling at extremely cold temperatures, e.g. lettuce, celery, cottage cheese and tomatoes. If frozen ice packs are to be used, pack them in last. As an alternative to an ice pack, a chilled bottle or can of soft drink will also help to keep the food cool.

It also may be worth remembering that ideally mid-morning snacks such as fruit should be stored separately. This will stop the lunch pack being opened at break time allowing the temperature to rise.

If refrigeration is not available at work or school, the lunch should be kept in the coolest place possible and out of direct sunlight. Try to ensure the lunch box is not stored near to a radiator or any other heat source.

Disposal of Waste Food

Remember to dispose of all leftover food in your waste/refuse bin. Never re-use left-over high-risk food. Wash and disinfect the lunch box every day and store in a clean, dry environment until required for use again.

Food Poisoning

The effects of food poisoning are unpleasant and may be quite severe for elderly people or for a child. It may lead to several days' absence from work, school or even admission to hospital.

Peak periods for food poisoning occur during the warm summer months, so extra care is needed during this period, particularly during the preparation process.

Remember, packed lunches can be fun, nutritious and safe **provided** the guidance is followed.

Healthy Menus

For ideas on healthy lunch box menus for children log on to www.eatwell.gov.uk

For further information please contact:

Environmental Health
Braintree District Council
Causeway House
Bocking End
Braintree
Essex CM7 9HB

For information on food safety please visit our website www.braintree.gov.uk follow the links for Food Safety or telephone 01376 551414.

If you would like this information in large print, Braille, or another language, please contact 01376 551414





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