

Lunches from home

Tips for Food Preparation, Storage and Handling

What is food poisoning?

If food is not prepared, stored and transported correctly, food poisoning micro-organisms present in food can multiply to dangerous levels. These microorganisms may be naturally present in food or may result from contact with other environmental sources such as soil, air, and hands.

Food poisoning occurs when contaminated food containing large numbers of micro-organisms is 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?

- Use an insulated lunchbox or bag if including foods that would normally be kept in refrigerators, for example ham, yoghurt, dairy products, fish, rice and other cooked perishable foods. A frozen drink bottle or freezer brick will also help maintain a safe temperature.
- Cooked perishable foods (e.g. boiled eggs) should be cooled in the refrigerator before being packed for lunch.
- Discard any perishable leftover school lunch food and do not re-use.
- Ask children to keep packed lunches out of direct sunlight and heat.
- Do not only rely on your senses (i.e. smell) to judge whether food is “off” or not. Take note of expiry dates and best-before dates.
- Lunchboxes and drink bottles must be thoroughly washed and dried daily.
- Remember, **if in doubt, throw it out.**

Preparing food safely

- Use separate chopping boards and utensils for raw and cooked foods or ready-to-eat foods. If this is not possible, ensure the boards 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 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, as recommended, 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 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.

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