

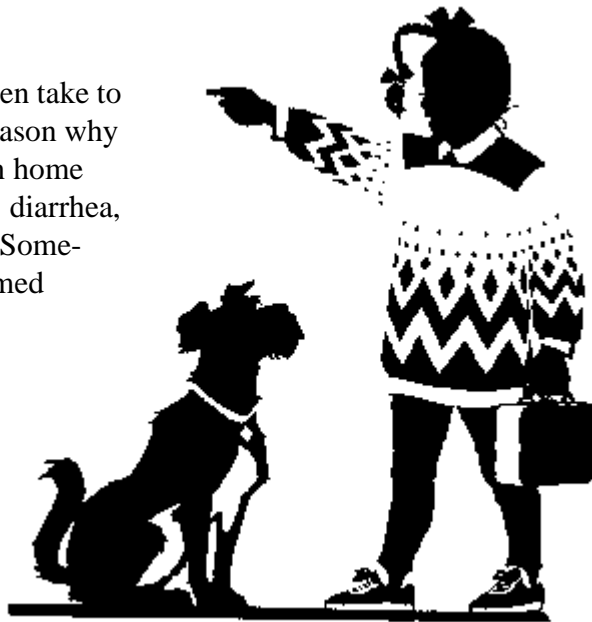
# How to Prepare a Healthy Lunch to Take to School

An English translation of a Spanish publication of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Texas A&M University, entitled "Cómo Preparar Almuerzos Sanos para Llevar a la Escuela." Translated by permission.

The food that children take to school can be the reason why some of them return home with stomach pains, diarrhea, and even vomiting. Sometimes, the flu is blamed for these symptoms when it is possible that they are caused by the bacteria that cause food poisoning.

Preparing a meal that can be stored at room temperature and eaten hours later requires extra care. The bacteria that cause food poisoning reproduce the best at room temperature. In fact, between the temperatures of 40 and 140 degrees F enough bacteria can reproduce within two hours to cause food poisoning.

Some foods should be kept cold (under 40 degrees F) or hot (above 140 degrees F). These are perishable foods such as meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, and dairy products (including yogurt). The most important thing in preparing a safe meal is to keep the cold foods cold and hot foods hot and to keep everything clean. The following is an explanation of how and why.



In order to reproduce, the bacteria that cause food poisoning need adequate temperature, humidity and a source of food. Moist foods that contain a lot of protein are the most susceptible to bacterial growth. If the food is touched a lot there is a greater chance of contaminating it with the bacteria from your hands. This is to say that there may be a greater chance of contamination with salads such as ham, chicken or egg.

If you select prepared meat for sandwiches observe the expiration dates very carefully. These products may contain bacteria that reproduce very slowly in a refrigerator.

Ideally, food should be kept in a refrigerator in order to keep them cold, but sometimes this is not possible. Lunchboxes, especially the most modern ones, keep food colder than a paper bag. Commercial coolers, a container of ice or a frozen drink help to keep the contents of a lunchbox cold. Tell the children to store the lunchbox in the

coolest place possible, never in front of a window in the sun.

In order to keep food hot for several hours, use a thermos designed to keep food hot. Heat the food as much as you can before placing it in the thermos. The food should still be hot to the touch when eaten. Wash the thermos well after each use and rinse the inside with boiling water before using it again.

Keep everything clean while preparing food for school in order to prevent the spread of germs. Make sure that your hands, the utensils and the counter are clean. Wash the food containers, including the thermos and lunchbox after each use. Wrap foods in clean wrapping paper. If you use paper bags use ones designed for that purpose. Shopping bags may be contaminated by insects and crumbs from other foods.

Sometimes, foods that do not need to be kept cold or hot may be desirable for these meals. These foods include peanut butter, preserved meats like jerky and some that are not perishable. Other options include canned meat, poultry or seafood that is ready to eat immediately; fresh fruit and vegetables; and breads, cereals and nuts. Some packaged "ready-to-eat" foods in individual portions, like canned fruit or pudding, are good for these meals.

## Remember..

Some foods that do not look, taste or smell bad can still be contaminated with enough bacteria to make you sick. In order to prepare a safe meal follow these tips.

- Keep everything clean when preparing and packing the meal.
- Plan a balanced menu of healthy foods that have been prepared correctly. Make sure that any meat has been cooked completely. Don't use leftovers that have been in the refrigerator for a long time.
- Keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot. Don't let these foods sit at room temperature for more than two hours.
- Don't use perishable leftovers from school lunches. Throw them away.



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