

USDA Provides Food Safety Tips to Keep Foodborne Illness Out of the Classroom

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 14, 2018 — It's the start of the new school year, which means new teachers, a bunch of homework assignments and the never-ending dilemma of what to include to make a healthy and safe school lunch.

“As a mother, I understand the stress that comes with the start of a new school year, but preparing a safe lunch doesn't have to be a challenge,” said Carmen Rottenberg, Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety at USDA. “Simple steps like washing your hands and keeping food at the correct temperature can stop the spread of bacteria and keep your children safe from foodborne illness.”

Handwashing is the first and easiest step to avoid foodborne illnesses. A recent study by USDA found that 97 percent of the times participants should have washed their hands they did not do so correctly or at all. This poor hand hygiene caused participants to cross-contaminate other spice containers, refrigerator handles, even ready-to-eat foods and other areas of their kitchen with a harmless tracer bacteria.

Because bacteria can live on surfaces for up to 32 hours, it's easy to contaminate sandwich bread and lunch meat when preparing your child's lunch. But this can be avoided by following a few basic food safety tips.

Back to School Food Safety Tips

- Make sure lunch bags and coolers are clean before packing. Pack moist towelettes so children can clean hands before and after eating.
- Use an insulated lunch bag or cooler and at least two cold sources, such as freezer packs, for lunches that contain perishable food items like luncheon meats, eggs, cheese or yogurt. This will help keep food safely cold at 40°F or below until lunch time.
- If packing a hot lunch, like soup, chili or stew, use an insulated container to keep it hot. Fill the container with boiling water, let stand for a few minutes, empty, and then put in the piping hot food. Tell children to keep the insulated container closed until lunchtime to keep the food at 140°F or above.
- For safety, instruct children to discard all leftover food and used food packaging.

Food Safety Basics

Keep these basic food safety steps in mind when packing lunches, making dinner and preparing food all year round.

Clean: Wash hands with soap and warm water, and surfaces with soap and hot water before and after handling food. Rinse raw produce in water before eating, cutting or cooking.

Separate: Avoid spreading bacteria from one food product to another. Use two separate cutting boards — one for raw meat and poultry, and one for produce or ready to eat foods.

Cook: The only way to make sure meat and poultry is safe to eat is to ensure it reaches the safe minimum internal temperature needed to destroy harmful bacteria. If sending soups, stews or chili to school, be sure to heat the food to 165°F, as measured by a food thermometer, before pouring it into an insulated container.

Chill: At room temperature, bacteria in food can double every 20 minutes. To avoid this, make sure to chill all perishable foods within two hours (one hour in temperatures above 90°F). Discard any perishable foods that were left at room temperature longer than that.

Consumers can learn more about key food safety practices at [Foodsafety.gov](https://www.foodsafety.gov), by following [@USDAFoodSafety](https://twitter.com/USDAFoodSafety) on Twitter, and by liking [Facebook.com/FoodSafety.gov](https://www.facebook.com/FoodSafety.gov). Consumers with questions about food safety can call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) or chat live with a food safety specialist at [AskKaren.gov](https://www.usda.gov/askkaren), available from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday, in English or Spanish.

If you have questions about storage times for food or beverages, download USDA's FoodKeeper application for [Android](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=usda.fk) and [iOS](https://apps.apple.com/us/app/foodkeeper/id1487441111) devices.