

Remember food safety when packing school lunches

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Soon children will again be taking their lunches to school, and because they are at higher-than-normal risk for foodborne illness, parents and caregivers need to pack those lunches with food safety in mind, said a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service expert.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, almost 50% of annual salmonella infections happen to infants and [school-age children](#).

"Food left at room temperature for too long of a time can put children at risk for [foodborne illness](#)," said Rebecca Dittmar, AgriLife Extension specialist in food protection management, Kerrville. "This is especially true during the [summer months](#) and the first few months of the school year."

Dittmar noted children typically have a higher risk of foodborne illness as their immune systems are not sufficiently developed to resist the bacteria that can grow on foods.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, food at temperatures between 40 and 140 degrees are in the "[danger zone](#)" and can allow bacteria to double in number in as little as 20 minutes.

For many foods, leaving them out at [room temperature](#) for longer than two hours can be risky.

To help prevent bacteria and foodborne illness, the USDA and Dittmar offer the following tips:

- Use an insulated [lunch](#) box or double paper bags.

"If your children are taking a lunch requiring refrigeration, find out if they have access to a refrigerator at school and remind them to put their lunch in it as soon as they get to school," she said. "And be sure to clearly mark your child's name on the bag or container."

- Use cold packs to cool perishable items such as lunch meats, eggs, cheese, milk and yogurt.

"These cold packs should also be used even in insulated lunch boxes or bags when there's perishable food inside," Dittmar said. "You can also freeze water or juice and use that to keep perishables cold, and the liquids should thaw by lunchtime."

While preparing foods in advance for school lunches is fine, Dittmar said it's best to pack them just before the child leaves for school.

"You can freeze some food for lunches, but it's not always a good idea to freeze all the ingredients," she said. "For example, it's usually not best to freeze complete sandwiches containing mayonnaise, lettuce, pickles or tomatoes or onions, as these don't usually taste particularly good when thawed. Keep these add-ons in a separate plastic bag or container so your child can put them on the sandwich just before eating it."

— Use a thermos or other insulated container to keep hot lunches at a warm temperature.

"If you put boiling water into the container and let it sit for a few minutes, then pour the water out and put in the hot food—like soup, stew or chili—this will help keep the contents warm until lunchtime," she said.

— Leave lunches in the refrigerator overnight if packing them the night before.

"To ensure the best results, store with the lid of the lunchbox or bag left open in the refrigerator so there's optimal air circulation to cool it down," she said.

— Put individually packaged disposable wipes in the lunch box or bag and remind children to use them before and after eating. This also reinforces the importance of hand cleaning and washing before meals.

— Discard all used lunch packaging and bags, and clean lunch boxes after use.

"Leftover food should also be discarded after lunch too, along with all used food packaging and paper bags," she said. "Reusing packaging is a bad idea as it could contaminate other [food](#) and cause foodborne illness. And keeping unrefrigerated perishables in a lunch box or bag so you can eat them later means they'll probably be in the temperature danger zone for a while and could become a safety risk."

Provided by Texas A&M University

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