

EXTENSION CONNECTION – Tips for Better School Lunches and After-school Snacks

By An ISU Extension Nutrition & Health Specialist

Q. What are some guidelines for lunches that children carry to school?

A. An Iowa State University Extension food science specialist, offers these tips for lunch and after-school snack preparation.

1. Wash hands, counters and utensils--water and soap are the best food safety tools. Hands should be washed with warm water and soap before handling food. Countertops and utensils should be wiped with hot soapy water before and after food preparation. Kids should be encouraged to wash their hands before eating, too.

"One of the most overlooked causes of food borne illness is dirty hands," said the specialist. "Failing to wash hands can transmit a variety of viruses including Norwalk virus and common cold virus. Clean hands and counters go a long way toward preventing illness."

2. Keep cold foods cold--temperature control is essential. Carried lunches are often prepared in the early morning and held in a school locker until noon. The resulting room temperature environment encourages the growth of illness-causing bacteria, especially in meat sandwiches.

"The best way to keep bacteria from multiplying in meat sandwiches is to keep them cold," said the specialist. "Making the sandwich the evening before and freezing it is one option. Other methods for keeping foods cold include using freezer gel packs, frozen juice boxes or frozen fruits, such as applesauce. An insulated lunch box also will help keep foods cold."

Likewise, if hot soups or other foods are sent for lunch, they also must be kept hot--not lukewarm. Preheating an insulated container with hot water before putting the food into it will help keep the food hot throughout the morning.

3. Shop smart--read labels before buying commercially prepared lunch and snack items. Some convenience foods are very high in sodium, fat and simple sugars, making them less than ideal choices for growing kids. Ready-to-eat items such as applesauce, fruit cocktail, fresh fruits, baby carrots, yogurt and shelf-stable puddings are more nutritious choices.

4. Check and replace water bottles. You see them everywhere-hanging off of backpacks, on desks, being refilled at the water fountain. But what kind of care do water bottles need?

"Wide mouth water bottles that are designed for reuse should be washed frequently with hot soapy water," the ISU Extension Specialist said. "Make sure the cap is cleaned by running hot soapy water through it and rinsing with hot water. To sanitize the bottle, use five drops of regular bleach in a full bottle of hot water. Allow the bottle to air dry and you are ready to go for the next day."

Commercially filled water bottles are designed for single use. "The narrow neck and mouth make these bottles difficult to clean," Beattie said. So exchange these bottles for new ones, often.

You may also call our toll-free ISU Answerline at 1-800-262-3804 for the answers to your questions.

