

Does Your Child's Lunch Box Make the Grade?

American Dietetic Association Survey Reveals Parents Need Refresher Course in Home Food Safety

CHICAGO (September 5, 2002) -- Even in today's fast-food world, parents are still concerned that kids are eating healthful foods for lunch. Yet, the most nutritious brown bag is not always prepared to withstand the lunch box bug - commonly known as food poisoning.

Today, the American Dietetic Association released findings from a national consumer survey* that revealed a majority of parents fail to practice proper food safety habits when packing up their child's lunch in the morning. For example, only 31 percent of parents always equip lunches with icepacks to help safeguard popular, and perishable, food items like deli-style sandwiches, dairy-based dips and dressings, cheese snacks, yogurt or milk.

To help keep kid-favorite foods cold until lunchtime, include a frozen icepack in your child's lunch box. A frozen, individual juice box also can help serve as a cold pack.

Locker Lunches

Each day, an average of three to four hours pass from when kids hop on the bus in the morning to when they dip into their lunch bags at noon. And, with limited access to refrigeration, 94 percent of children typically store their lunch either in a locker, on a shelf or in their backpacks - further increasing the potential risk of foodborne illness.

As a general rule of thumb, foods should not sit out unrefrigerated for more than two hours; in hot weather, 90° Fahrenheit or above, this time is reduced to one hour. This is especially important for schools without air conditioning or those with lockers located outside.

In addition to the icepack, help protect your child's lunch from heat by investing in a well-insulated bag, container or lunchbox. When using paper bags, make sure to double-bag-it. Remember to instruct your child to throw away all perishable leftovers after lunch, saving only shelf-stable items for a quick snack before any after-school activities.

Backpack-Savvy Snacks

Typically, parents pack lunches that include perishable items, such as meat or cheese sandwiches (82 percent), chips and dip (69 percent) or yogurt or yogurt products (42 percent).

Consider substituting these easy and healthy, shelf-stable foods in school lunches (many also make for great afternoon treats):

- Breads/Grains: single-serving boxes of cereal, trail mix, energy bars, granola bars, cereal bars, bagels, muffins, crackers, popcorn and chips
- Fruits and Vegetables: carrot and celery sticks and other cut-up raw vegetables, grapes, single-serve applesauce, whole fruit (apples, peaches, bananas), dried fruit mix and juice boxes

- Dairy Alternatives: single-serve milk or soy beverage boxes and pudding cups
- Meat and Other Protein Sources: cans of tuna, peanut butter (for sandwiches or with celery and apples), nuts and single-serve packages of peanut butter and crackers

Staying Squeaky Clean

Nearly three quarters (73 percent) of parents have started to do their food safety homework by washing their hands as a first step in preparing school lunches. However, 61 percent of parents are unsure of whether they have successfully passed this primary safe food handling practice on to their children.

Teach your child to lather up before eating or handling food - carefully washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. You may want to include a packet of moist towelettes in your child's lunch to serve as a friendly reminder to clean up before lunchtime.

Many parents (71 percent) also are incorporating fresh fruit and vegetables for a healthy treat at lunch. Just make sure to wash all fresh fruits and vegetables under fresh, cool tap water before packing them. And lastly, if not using paper bags, make sure to thoroughly clean your child's lunch container daily — just another way to keep the lunch box bug at bay.

With approximately 65,000 members, the American Dietetic Association is the nation's largest organization of food and nutrition professionals. ADA serves the public by promoting optimal nutrition, health and well-being. To locate a registered dietitian in your area, visit the American Dietetic Association at www.eatright.org.

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**Impulse Research Corporation conducted the home food safety survey in August 2002 for the American Dietetic Association through an online survey of 1,011 men and women age 20 and older with a margin of error of + 3%*

Contact: Jennifer Starkey	Julia Dombrowski
American Dietetic Association	American Dietetic Association
800/877-1600, ext. 4802	800/877-1600, ext. 4769