

Kids Deliver the Lunch Box Lowdown

New Survey of Kids Conducted by ADA Reveals Home Food Safety Pitfalls That Occur After the Lunch Box Leaves Your Kitchen

CHICAGO (August 11, 2004) -- The brownbag lunch you packed for your child may be healthy when it leaves your kitchen, but how safe is it when the lunch bell rings?

According to a new survey of kids conducted by the American Dietetic Association, a majority of kids (83 percent) say they bring their lunch to school at least once or twice a week, while more than half (55 percent) "brownbag it" up to five times a week. But each of these lunches could put your child at risk of foodborne illness if it's not packed or handled correctly. For instance, while many lunches contain popular perishables such as meat or cheese sandwiches (72 percent), pre-packaged lunch kits (47 percent), string cheese (41 percent) and yogurt (40 percent), most kids' lunches are not packed properly to prevent these foods from spoiling before noon. In turn, almost a quarter of kids admit to having felt sick after eating their lunch.

The information that kids provide can be especially insightful because they haven't yet learned to be cautious. Although parents may have the best intentions when it comes to packing their child's lunch, survey results show most parents are unaware of the home food safety hazards that can happen once the lunch is out of their hands and in their child's.

CONSIDER THE FRIDGE FACTOR

Nearly every child (99 percent) reports that at least three to four hours pass from the time their lunch is packed at home until they eat it at school, while in some cases (12 percent), as many as five to six hours can pass until the lunch bell rings.

Yet what many of these kids (as well as their parents) may not know is that perishable foods should not remain unrefrigerated for longer than two hours — the point at which harmful bacteria begin to multiply rapidly. In hot weather (90°F or above), this window is reduced to one hour. However, more than nine out of 10 kids say they keep their lunches on a classroom shelf or in their locker, backpack, or desk until it's time to eat. In addition, 40 percent of all lunches do not include an ice pack to help keep perishable foods properly chilled.

Since most kids don't have access to a refrigerator at school, including a frozen ice pack is an easy way to help prevent perishable foods from spoiling. Another alternative is to use a frozen juice box, water bottle or single-serve plastic milk container — it works just as well and does double duty as a cold lunchtime drink. Use a well-insulated lunch bag or lunch box — instead of a paper or plastic bag — to help protect perishables.

EXPLORE STABLE SOLUTIONS

When including a frozen ice pack or beverage isn't possible, guarantee kids' lunchtime safety by choosing foods that stay safe when left unrefrigerated. Consider substituting these shelf-stable foods in school lunches and for after school snacks:

- **Breads/Grains:** single-serving boxes of cereal, trail mix, energy bars, granola bars, cereal bars, bagels and popcorn.
- **Fruits and Vegetables:** carrot and celery sticks and other cut-up raw vegetables, grapes, single-serve applesauce, whole fruit (apples, peaches, bananas, oranges), dried fruit mix and juice boxes. Note: In addition to washing vegetables and ready-to-eat fruits like apples and peaches, it's also important to

wash peel-and-eat fruits including bananas and oranges to eliminate harmful bacteria that can spread during peeling or cutting.

- **Dairy/Dairy Alternatives:** fortified soy/rice milk and pudding cups.
- **Meat and Other Protein Sources:** cans/pouches of tuna or tuna salad, peanut butter (for sandwiches or with celery and apples), nuts and single-serve packages of peanut butter and crackers.

ADVISE AGAINST UNFAIR TRADING

According to the survey, 84 percent of kids say they trade foods with their friends some or most of the time during lunch at school. But while you washed your hands before preparing your child's lunch – and included an ice pack to keep perishable foods safe — who knows if your child's friend's lunch was prepared with the same care?

While trading lunch items may be a popular thing to do among classmates and friends, it's also a potential health hazard. Remind kids not to trade food with friends since they don't know if their classmates' lunches were safely prepared or stored.

FOLLOW A CLEAN ROUTINE

The ADA survey also reveals that while moms are most likely to make lunches for school, a majority of kids also are lending a hand: nearly 80 percent say they help out some or most of the time. But while teaming up to prepare lunch is a great idea, parents should remember that even when they're not aware of it, they're modeling behavior.

For instance, more than a quarter of all kids say that their parents or other adults do not consistently wash their hands with soap and water before making school lunches. Similarly, almost half (46 percent) of kids admit that they, too, don't always wash their hands before making lunch. And nearly three out of five confess that they don't regularly wash their hands before eating lunch – which may be particularly hazardous for the two-thirds who have a morning recess prior to lunchtime!

Washing your hands is one of the most basic steps everyone can take to help prevent foodborne illness — so it's very important that parents serve as role models for hand-washing behaviors. When parents lather up before eating or preparing food, they're teaching their kids a valuable lesson and setting a precedent for proper home food safety.

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%*

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