



It's National Food Safety Education Month! Stop Foodborne Illness offers tips for ensuring safe school lunches

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September is National Food Safety Education Month and with kids back in school, now is a good time for parents to become knowledgeable about how to prevent foodborne illness from school lunches—whether packed at home or purchased in the school cafeteria. Stop Foodborne Illness, the leading national advocate for safe food, is shining the spotlight on ways to keep school lunches safe and kids healthy.

Teachers, food safety activism isn't just for parents. Teachers can take action as well by adding food safety to their curriculum. Use Stop's [Curriculum Materials and Education Resources for Teachers](#) to educate your students and make a difference.

Packing safe school lunches

Keeping harmful pathogens out of the lunch box should be a goal of every parent. When packing your child's lunch with food safety in mind, Stop Foodborne Illness suggests you:

- **Wash your hands.** When preparing lunches, Stop Foodborne Illness emphasizes the importance of [washing your hands thoroughly](#), as well as keeping all the surfaces you're working on clean.
- **Encourage your child to wash their hands**, before AND after eating their lunch. Hand-washing with soap and water is best, but a hand sanitizer or wipe with 60% alcohol will work in a pinch.
- **Keep in mind the bacteria danger zone.** The temperature "danger zone" of 40°-140° F is where bacteria grow most rapidly.
- **Use an insulated lunch box.** Whether hard-sided or soft, this helps keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot until it's time to eat them. Food safety experts agree: This is a "must have" item. Using an insulated box will help keep your child's food out of the bacteria "danger zone."

- **Hot: Use an insulated thermos.** Hot foods like soups, chili, or mac and cheese stay hot until lunch. You can preheat your thermos by filling it with boiling water, letting it sit for a few minutes, pouring out the water, and then adding your hot food.
- **Hot: Pack foods while hot.** Don't wait for hot foods to cool down before packing. Instead, pour piping hot foods like soups immediately into an insulated thermos.
- **Cold: Freeze drinks before packing.** Freezing milk and juice boxes, and water bottles will help keep the drinks cold, along with other cold foods you've packed. Frozen items will slowly melt during morning classes and be ready for drinking at lunch.
- **Cold: Use ice packs.** Another "great idea," according to Stop Foodborne Illness, these inexpensive items are an alternative to freezing drinks, and are vital for keeping cold foods cold. You can pick them up for about \$1 each.
- **Wash and separate fresh fruits/veggies.** Stop Foodborne Illness recommends washing produce thoroughly before packing in plastic containers to keep them away from other foods. After washing, dry produce with a clean cloth towel or paper towel to further reduce bacteria that may be present on the surface.
- **Use individual snack packs.** If many hands are in and out of a "family size" bag, the potential for exposure to bacteria is greater. To help prevent the spread of germs for school lunches, Stop recommends using individual-sized servings of items like pretzels, chips, and cookies.
- **Add room-temperature-safe foods.** Use nonperishable items or foods that do not need refrigeration like peanut butter, jelly, cookies, crackers, chips, dried fruit and certain whole fruits.
- **Avoid putting food on bare tables.** Pack a paper towel or napkin, or some wax paper so that when kids are in the cafeteria, or common area, they can avoid putting their food on the table.
- **Explain the five-second myth.** Be sure your child knows that the "Five-second rule" is a myth. Any food that touches the floor needs to be thrown away. (No one wants to lick the bottom of your shoe.)
- **Toss perishable food.** To avoid foodborne illness, let your child know it is OK to throw away perishables like meat, poultry or egg sandwiches, if not eaten at lunchtime. Unopened, room-temperature-safe foods and uneaten fruit can be kept.
- **Make sure lunch boxes are regularly cleaned and sanitized.** We recommend you clean your child's box each evening before packing the next day's lunch. Find out more with these [box cleaning tips](#).

Food Safety Tips for School Cafeteria Lunches

For children who eat their lunch through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), Stop Foodborne Illness believes it is imperative to teach them good food safety habits even if they eat in the school cafeteria, too. Stop Foodborne Illness urges you to do these things:

First, talk with your kids about this issue and share food safety tips they need to use, which include:

- **Washing their hands.** Your child should wash his/her hands before and after they eat.
- **Avoiding putting food on tables.** Keep it on the plate or put a napkin down.

- **Checking for undercooked food.** For instance, if hamburger meat looks raw/pink, your child shouldn't eat it. "Hot" foods that are cold in the middle should not be eaten.
- **Checking for food that looks spoiled.** Your child shouldn't eat vegetables or fruits that are wilting, have mold or look discolored. [Help your child learn more with these tips.](#)
- **Reporting unsanitary conditions.** Examples include: Cafeteria workers not wearing gloves or hairnets, surfaces or equipment that are dirty, yellowish water flowing from a drinking fountain, and bugs or rodents roaming around. Help your child understand why these kinds of conditions, are unacceptable and how to report it to a school authority ASAP.
- **Inspect the cafeteria yourself.** Stop Foodborne Illness urges every parent to contact their child's school and ask for a personal visit to take a good look around the kitchen and cafeteria. Anything that looks like a possible food safety hazard should be discussed to school authorities.

Feel free to use Stop's factsheet [Rylee & Rusty Discuss Food Safety](#); a kid-friendly way to start a conversation with your children about food safety.

Though the U.S. Department of Agriculture states they are "committed to a comprehensive, coordinated approach to food safety for the NSLP," the sad reality is that Stop Foodborne Illness has recounted numerous stories shared by parents of children who have become gravely ill from lunches served at schools.

On their website, you can find [the story of Lindsay](#), a young girl who endured extensive health problems and horrific pain after eating a contaminated strawberry dessert that was served at her Michigan school. And Lindsay wasn't the only victim. A huge outbreak ensued with hundreds more Michigan children getting sick with Hepatitis A from tainted strawberries.

Next, Stop asks that you become an advocate for improved school food safety practices. Start by reviewing this [Food-Safe Schools Action Guide](#) published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It's intended for school nutrition directors, but it's an excellent resource for parents, too. This guide helps bring together all aspects of safety that need to be considered when serving food in schools. It'll help you become aware of regulations, ask good questions, and take action on anything you feel isn't up to snuff.

Get involved. Take action.

Stop Foodborne Illness Is Here to Help You

Stop Foodborne Illness is a national, nonprofit, public health organization dedicated to preventing illness and death from foodborne pathogens by promoting sound food safety policy and best practices, building public awareness and assisting those impacted by foodborne illness. For more food safety tips please

visit www.stopfoodborneillness.org/awareness/. If you think you have been sickened from food, [check this out](#) and contact your local health professional.

For questions and personal assistance, please contact Stop Foodborne Illness' Community Coordinator, Stanley Rutledge, at srutledge@stopfoodborneillness.org or 773-269-6555 x7. To donate to Stop, visit [here](#).

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