

Title: Safe Sack Lunches

We're in full school mode here in Geary County. Busses are running, parents are rearranging their morning routines, and kids are toting backpacks and perhaps lunch sacks. Although many kids who carry their meals to school pack their own lunch, parents and caregivers need to pay special attention to safe food handling practices as children make these preparations to avoid food-borne illness.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that an estimated 1 in 6 Americans are stricken with food poisoning each year. What can you do to make sure that you or your child do not become ill from a lunch bag "gone bad?" Follow these four standard food safety guidelines: Clean, Separate, Cook, and Chill.

Clean: When preparing a sack lunch, be sure the first step is washing your hands. Although antibacterial hand sanitizer is an option, washing your hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds is a much better choice. Use clean surfaces, utensils, and cutting boards. Cross-contamination can occur if you mistakenly place cooked food on the same surface where uncooked food is prepared. Washing cutting boards between uses prevents cross-contamination.

Separate: Another way to help protect from cross-contamination is to use separate cutting boards for different foods. Use one for fresh produce and another for meat and poultry preparation. Use separate knives, as well. If you must use the same knife for both raw meat and fresh produce, thoroughly wash it between preparation steps.

Cook: Check the internal temperature of food that is being cooked to ensure that any bacteria is prevented from causing a food borne illness. Use a food thermometer to ensure you have cooked to a safe temperature. The USDA recommends the following minimal internal temperatures:

Product	Minimum Internal Temperature
All Poultry (breasts, whole bird, legs, thighs, and wings, ground poultry, and stuffing)	165 °F (73.9 °C)
Eggs	160 °F (71.1 °C)
Fish & Shellfish	145 °F (62.8 °C)
Leftovers	165 °F (73.9 °C)

Chill: If the lunch contains perishable food such as lunchmeat, yogurt, and eggs make sure you pack it with at least two cold sources like freezer packs and/or frozen water bottles. Surround the perishables so that they have a cold source on each side.

Once you put these four steps into practice, there are some additional measures you can take makes a packed lunch more practical and safe.

- 1) Frozen juice boxes make an excellent cold source for a packed lunch. As the morning passes, the juice thaws for a healthy and food safe alternative to other sugary drinks like pop.
- 2) Avoid using sacks for packing a lunch if you choose to pack perishable foods. Sacks (plastic or paper) do not maintain a cold enough temperature for food safety purposes. Use an insulated lunch box or bag instead.
- 3) Remind children to wash their hands with warm soapy water before they eat their sack lunch. To help them measure the 20 seconds needed to rid their hands of germs, tell them to sing the ABC song twice as they wash.
- 4) If possible, a packed lunch should be stored in the refrigerator. When doing so, leave the lid of the insulated lunchbox or lunch bag open to ensure that the cool air can get in the container and circulate around the food. If a refrigerator is not available, it is important to leave the insulated lunch container closed until it is time to eat to help maintain the cold inside.
- 5) When packing a hot lunch, like soup or stew, heat up an insulated container with boiling water for a few minutes before empty the container for you to put the hot food in. Keep the container closed until it is time to eat so that you keep the food as hot as possible – at least 140°F.
- 6) After your child has eaten, tell them to through all leftover food, food packaging, and paper products in the trash. Reusing packaging can cause cross contamination and make your child sick.

Getting started: Sometimes you just need a new idea to help you get started. A favorite of my children is a tortilla wrap. I use frozen water bottles and a small freezer pack in an insulated lunch box to make sure it stays crisp and cold until meal time. A tortilla wrap is also a good way to let them choose what ingredients to put in the wrap.

USDA has an online recipe collection of foods that are healthy options and easy to prepare. Here is their version of a wrap that includes a variety of colorful and healthy ingredients:

The Charger Wrap (makes 6 servings)

INGREDIENTS

- 1 ½ cups** Chicken breast, cooked and chopped
- 1 teaspoon** lemon pepper
- 6** 8" whole grain flour tortillas
- 1 ½ cups** Romaine lettuce, chopped
- 6 tablespoons** green peppers, diced
- ¾ pound** tomatoes, diced (**about 1 medium tomato**)
- ¾ pound (3 cups)** low-fat mozzarella cheese, shredded

DIRECTIONS

- 1. Place chopped chicken in a large bowl and sprinkle with lemon pepper. Gently toss to coat chicken evenly with seasoning. Set aside.**
- 2. Place whole grain tortilla wrap on working surface.**

- 3. Top each wrap with: ¼ cup chopped chicken, ¼ cup Romaine lettuce, 1 tablespoon green peppers, 3 tablespoons tomatoes. Garnish with ½ tablespoon mozzarella cheese.**
- 4. Roll the “Charger Wrap” and serve.**

Source: www.usda.gov/whatscooking
Beavercreek City Schools (Recipes for Healthy Kids Competition)

Packing your lunch is a great way to eat healthy and save money. For more ideas about preparing meals that are economical, safe, and healthy, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!