

Refrigerate after opening

Tips to keep school lunches safe

By Audrie Armes, editorial assistant

According to the American Dietetic Association, each day an average of three to four hours pass from the time kids hop on the bus in the morning to when they open their lunches at noon. With limited access to refrigeration, 94 percent of children store their lunches in either a locker, on a shelf or in their backpacks, increasing the risk of foodborne illness.

The most common signs of foodborne illness include abdominal cramps, diarrhea, vomiting, head or muscle aches, and fever. Symptoms usually appear 12 to 72 hours after eating contaminated food but may occur between 30 minutes and four weeks later. Most people recover within four to seven days without antibiotic treatment.

One way to combat foodborne illness is to buy fresh from the start. Nancy Culotta, spokesperson for NSF International, Ann Arbor, MI, heads up a Fresh Check Program that helps supermarkets ensure their deli meats and produce are of the highest quality. She works with stores to improve sanitation processes, which lead to a longer shelf life for foods.

To help parents pack the freshest possible lunches for their children, thereby making lunchtime safer, she offered the following tips:

- Don't choose bruised or slimy fruit; buy only high quality, fresh produce.
- Pay attention to whether meat is on ice and if it has been cut that day. Look at the "sell by" dates on deli

items and don't buy anything on or the day before the "sell by" date.

- Look for meats with a healthy look and color.
- Buy non-perishables first when grocery shopping. Save frozen and refrigerated items until you're ready to check out. "Temperature abuse doesn't make food unsafe but it does reduce the shelf life of meat in your refrigerator," Culotta said.

As a general rule, foods should not sit unrefrigerated for more than two hours; in hot weather — 90° F or above — this time is reduced to one hour. If your child does not have access to a refrigerator, try the following tricks to keep them safe and healthy:

- Use only fresh meats and poultry, dairy products, and eggs. The fresher these items, the less likely they will spoil before lunchtime.
- Prepare sandwiches the night before and freeze or refrigerate them.
- Put the thermos in the freezer before filling with a cold beverage. If you pack juice, you may freeze the filled thermos. This helps keep both the beverage and the lunch cold.

In addition to using an ice pack in the bag, protect your child's lunch by investing in a well-insulated bag, container or lunchbox. Culotta advocates the use of ice packs, "Always use an ice pack whether you think you need it or not." She explained that keeping an apple cold as well as your child's

sandwich won't hurt anything and always using an ice pack is a good rule of thumb.

"Lunches containing ice packs have more staying power," explained David Grotto, spokesperson for the Chicago-based ADA. "Parents can freeze juice boxes and use them for the same purpose, but juice defrosts at a higher rate."

Once a lunch's ice pack has melted, Grotto noted, your child has about a two-hour window of opportunity to eat the lunch before having to throw it away for safety's sake. Remember to instruct your child to throw away all perishable leftovers after lunch, saving only non-perishable items for a quick snack later in the day. **S+H**

