

Bringing your lunch to work or preparing lunches for your children to take to school is a tradition that ensures your loved ones eat a healthy and balanced lunch.



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Food Safety

# Brown Bag Lunch

Learn how to keep packed lunches free from foodborne illnesses





## “BROWN BAG” LUNCHES AND FOOD SAFETY

Bringing your lunch to work or preparing lunches for your children to take to school is a tradition that ensures your loved ones eat a healthy and balanced lunch. However, lunchtime food safety begins before the brown bag, when food brought from home is first selected, prepared, transported, and stored safely before eating. To keep the lunch safe from spoilage during the day, keep the following food safety tips in mind.

### Choose Safe Foods

The humble peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich comes from a time before the widespread availability of home refrigeration and is still a staple of today's lunches. The foods generally found in lunches can be split into two categories: Non-Perishable and Perishable.

Non-Perishable foods do not have to stay cold to be safe. Most famously, bread, peanut butter, and jelly are non-perishable and this combination as a sandwich makes it perfect for brown bag lunches. Other non-perishable foods that are safe for lunches include whole fruits, crackers, pickles and unopened cans/packets of meat and fish.

Perishable foods are foods that must be kept cold during the day to be safe for us to eat during lunch. Most commonly they are lunch meats, such as cold cuts, and pre-made salads with tuna, egg, or chicken as an ingredient. All of these foods must be kept refrigerated. However, it's not just homemade sandwiches and salads that need refrigeration. If you choose to use readymade lunches with meat or cheese in them, these must also be kept refrigerated and cold throughout the day.

### Prepare the Lunch Safely

Be sure you wash your hands before making the lunch and make sure the countertops, cutting boards, utensils, and storage bags/boxes/pails are sanitized before and during their use.

Don't cross-contaminate: use separate and clean cutting boards and utensils for meats, produce, and breads.

Keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot, and don't leave food out for longer than 2 hours.

You may wish to prepare the food the night before. That's okay, but pack lunch bags right before leaving home. Freezing sandwiches helps them stay cold. However, don't freeze sandwiches containing mayonnaise, lettuce, or tomatoes. These items can be added later.

### Packing, Transporting, and Storing

The very nature of bag lunches makes it difficult to keep food properly refrigerated [40°F (4.4°C) or colder] while commuting to work or school and storing before lunch.

The best choice for keeping lunches cold is an insulated bag or box. Metal or plastic lunch boxes without insulation are your next best choice, followed by paper bags. No matter the bag or box, use ice packs to keep food cold. Freezing a juice box or water bottle, then placing it in with the food is also a way to keep the lunch cold

during the day. This will serve to keep the lunch cold and as a drink during lunch time.

For hot foods like soup, chili, or stew, use an insulated container to keep food hot. Fill the container with boiling water, let stand for a few minutes, empty, and then put in the piping hot food. Keep the insulated container closed until lunchtime to keep the food hot—140 °F (60°C) or above.

Reheat lunch food items to at least 165°F (73.9°C); use a food thermometer to check that a safe temperature has been reached before eating. When microwaving, cover food to hold in moisture and promote safe, even heating. Cook frozen convenience meals according to package instructions.



### Clean Up

Remember to pack only what can be eaten at lunch time. Lunch leftovers that aren't stored properly for the rest of the day may not be safe to eat later. If you cannot refrigerate the food, it is best to throw it out.

Do not reuse paper lunch bags, sandwich bags, foil, or plastic wrap. Unfortunately, once these items have been used, they can contaminate other food and cause foodborne illness. The safest thing to do is to discard them.