

SEPTEMBER IS  
**National Food Safety  
Education Month**



**Store It. Don't Ignore It.**

**Background**

September marks the ninth annual National Food Safety Education Month<sup>SM</sup>. The goals of the Month are:

- To reinforce food safety education and training among restaurant and foodservice workers.
- To educate the public to handle and prepare food properly at home, where food safety is equally important--whether cooking from scratch or serving take-out meals and restaurant leftovers.

**What is food borne illness, and what are the symptoms?**

Food borne illness often presents itself as flu-like symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or fever, so many people may not recognize the illness is caused by bacteria or other pathogens in food. Thousands of types of bacteria are naturally present in our environment. Not all bacteria cause disease in humans. For example, some bacteria are used beneficially in making cheese and yogurt. Bacteria that cause disease are called pathogens. When certain pathogens enter the food supply, they can cause food borne illness. Millions of cases of food borne illness occur each year. Most cases of food borne illness can be prevented. Proper cooking or processing of food destroys bacteria. Age and physical condition place some persons at higher risk than others, no matter what type of bacteria is implicated. Very young children, pregnant women, the elderly and people with compromised immune systems are at greatest risk from any pathogen. Some persons may become ill after ingesting only a few harmful bacteria; others may remain symptom free after ingesting thousands.

How can I prevent food borne illness?

There are four basic steps to follow:

- Clean: Wash hands and surfaces often
- Separate: Don't cross-contaminate
- Cook: Cook to proper temperatures
- Chill: Refrigerate promptly

**How do I prevent cross-contamination (the transfer of harmful bacteria to food from other foods) when using a cutting board?**

- Always use a clean cutting board. Wash cutting boards, dishes, and counter tops with hot, soapy water after preparing each food item and before you go on to the next item.
- If possible, use one cutting board for fresh produce and a separate one for raw meat, poultry, and seafood.
- Once cutting boards become excessively worn or develop hard-to-clean grooves, you should replace them.

Routine, thorough hand washing with soap and lots of water reduces fecal and most hand-nasal contamination. Cutting boards, countertops and other surfaces should be scrubbed with soap and water and rinsed with a bleach-water solution after they have come in contact with raw meat, fish or poultry. 1 Tb bleach to 1 gal water gives 200 ppm available chlorine.



## Keeping “Bag” Lunches Safe

Food brought from home can be kept safe if it is first handled and cooked safely. After arriving at school, perishable food must be kept cold until lunchtime. Why keep food cold? Harmful bacteria multiply rapidly in the “danger zone” -- the temperatures between 40 and 140 °F. So, perishable food transported without an ice source won't stay safe long. Here are safe handling recommendations to prevent food borne illness from “bag” lunches.

### Begin with Safe Food

Perishable food, such as raw or cooked meat and poultry, must be kept cold or frozen at the store and at home. Eggs should be purchased cold at the store and kept cold at home. In between, transport perishable food as fast as possible when no ice source is available. At the destination, it must be kept cold. Food should not be left out at room temperature more than 2 hours (1 hour if the temperature is above 90 °F).

Prepackaged combos that contain luncheon meats along with crackers, cheese, and condiments must also be kept refrigerated. This includes luncheon meats and smoked ham which are cured or contain preservatives.

### Keep Everything Clean

Wash your hands before you prepare or eat food. Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and countertops with hot, soapy water after preparing each food item and before you go on to the next item. A solution of 1 teaspoon of bleach in 1 quart of water may be used to sanitize surfaces and utensils. Keep family pets away from kitchen counters.

### Don't Cross-Contaminate

Harmful bacteria can spread throughout the kitchen and get onto cutting boards, utensils, and countertops. Always use a clean cutting board. When using a cutting board for food that will not be cooked, such as bread, lettuce, and tomatoes, be sure to wash the board after using it to cut raw meat and poultry. Use one cutting board for fresh produce and a separate one for meat and poultry.

At lunchtime, discard all used food packaging and paper bags. Do not reuse packaging because it could contaminate other food and cause food borne illness.

### Packing Lunches

Pack just the amount of perishable food that can be eaten at lunch. That way, there won't be a problem about the storage or safety of leftovers. It's fine to prepare the food the night before and store the packed lunch in the refrigerator. Freezing sandwiches helps them stay cold. However, for best quality, don't freeze sandwiches containing mayonnaise, lettuce, or tomatoes. Add these later. Insulated, soft-sided lunch boxes or bags are best for keeping food cold, but metal or plastic lunch boxes and paper bags can also be used. If using paper lunch bags, create layers by double bagging to help insulate the food. An ice source should be packed with perishable food in any type of lunch bag or box.

### Keeping Cold Lunches Cold

Prepare cooked food, such as turkey, ham, chicken, and vegetable or pasta salads, ahead of time to allow for thorough chilling in the refrigerator. Divide large amounts of food into shallow containers for fast chilling and easier use. Keep cooked food refrigerated until time to leave home. To keep lunches cold away from home, include a small frozen gel pack or frozen juice box. Of course, if there's a refrigerator available, store perishable items there upon arrival. Some food is safe without a cold source. Items that don't require refrigeration include fruits, vegetables, hard cheese, canned meat and fish, chips, breads, crackers, peanut butter, jelly, mustard, and pickles.

### Keeping Hot Lunches Hot

Use an insulated container to keep food like soup, chili, and stew 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 or above.

For more information check out publications such as [Basics for Handling Food Safety](#). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has information available at [www.cdc.gov/foodsafety](http://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety). Or, visit the Partnership for Food Safety Education Web site at [www.fightbac.org](http://www.fightbac.org).