



MEDIA RELEASE: 27 January 2011

UNPACKING SCHOOL AND WORK LUNCH BOX FOOD SAFETY HAZARDS

As holiday gifts boxes, beach bags and long, leisurely lunches give way to school and work lunchboxes the Food Safety Information Council urges Australians to heed basic food safety advice – choose, clean, cook, chill and separate – to minimise the risk of food poisoning.

Council Chairman, Dr Michael Eyles, says as the summer heats up and busy lives return it's important to spend time to ensure food poisoning isn't packed in our own, or our children's lunchboxes.

'Preparing lunches for yourself and family is convenient, nutritional, and often a money saver, but the simple food safety tips provided by the Food Safety Information Council need to be followed to avoid becoming one of the estimated 5.4 million Australian food poisoning victims annually,' Dr Eyles says.

CHOOSE

Choose low risk foods including hard cheeses, well cooked meats and poultry, fresh, well-washed fruits and vegetables, and sandwich spreads such as honey and vegemite.

Avoid foods which may have higher risks such as raw egg mayonnaise, soft cheeses, deli meats, pates, etc.

When buying lunchboxes choose ones which are easy to clean and dry. Insulated lunchboxes are a great idea, but not if they are difficult to keep clean.

CLEAN

When preparing food, always practice scrupulous handwashing.

Lunchboxes and reusable drink bottles must be thoroughly washed and dried daily. If cracked, split or crazed, replace as bugs love hidey holes.

Ensure cutting boards, benches and utensils are clean and dry.

Wash all fruits and vegetables thoroughly.

With a staff kitchen, set up a roster to ensure bench tops are clean and dish cloths, sponges, brushes and tea towels are clean and replaced regularly. Wash dirty dishes in hot soapy water or put in the dishwasher.

COOK

Make sure lunch foods are cooked properly in the first place.

When reheating, make sure they are steaming hot all the way through – stir or turn food as appropriate.

CHILL

Lunches can safely be prepared a little ahead of time provided they are kept in the fridge or frozen.

When leaving home, pack a frozen juice box, water bottle or commercial ice pack with the lunch. Place perishable foods such as cheeses and sandwiches between the frozen items.

Lunchboxes kept inside the school bag will keep cooler longer especially if the bag is away from heat sources such as direct sunlight.

Divide cooked leftovers into small lunch-sized portions so they refrigerate or freeze quickly.

Put food in the fridge as soon as you get to work or, if working on construction sites, outdoors or other environments with limited access to refrigerators, pack food in insulated containers with frozen drinks or freezer bricks and place the container in a cool place between meal breaks.

Staff fridges should be uncrowded and running at or below 5°C. Provide labels and a pen so people can label and date any food they put in the fridge.

SEPARATE

Make sure lunchbox foods have been well separated from other foods in the refrigerator, particularly meats, chicken and fish, the juices of which will contaminate foods which won't be cooked before adding to the lunchbox, such as fruits.

GENERAL ADVICE

If in doubt throw it out!

Warn children against sharing drink bottles. Sharing lunches is also not a good idea as it is difficult to know what allergies other children may have, or whether the foods have been prepared using the basic food safety tips..

If you or your child has food poisoning don't go to work or school, and avoid handling food for others for 48 hours after symptoms such as vomiting and diarrhoea stop. If food poisoning symptoms persist, visit a doctor.

Food poisoning results, on average, in 120 deaths, 1.2 million visits to doctors, 300,000 prescriptions for antibiotics, and 2.1 million days of lost work each year. The estimated annual cost of food poisoning in Australia is \$1.25 billion.

*The **Food Safety Information Council** is Australia's leading disseminator of consumer targeted food safety information. It is a non-profit entity supported by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing, state and territory health and food safety agencies, local government, and leading professional, industry and community organisations.*

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FURTHER INFORMATION: www.foodsafety.asn.au

NOTE: Pronunciation of 'Eyles': as for 'British Isles', or 'supermarket aisles'.