Keep it cool

Safely pack school lunches to prevent spoiling.

Tips from Nancy Gal, Marion County UF/IFAS Extension Service, Extension Agent IV

Even good-for-you food can be unhealthy if it isn’t prepared properly or kept safe from spoiling. So, toss out that brown paper lunch bag! Send your little scholars’ lunches to school with them in an insulated lunchbox with a cold pack so the temperature is controlled.

Here’s an easy way to remember what needs to stay “refrigerator cold” -- if you keep it in the refrigerator at home, then it needs to stay refrigerated away from home.

Several hours pass from the time you pack the lunch in the morning until your child eats it. Remember the two-hour rule: perishable food should not be in the “temperature danger zone” – the temperature between 40 and 140 degrees – for more than two hours. Do temperatures topping 100 degrees seem high? Remember, the inside of your parked car can reach those temperatures very quickly on a hot day!

No guessing needed! Check out these lists to make sure you’re packing food safely.

* Food that needs to be kept cold to stay safe:
  - Cooked meat, poultry, fish, hard boiled eggs, deli meats and pizza.
  - Leftover foods such as beans and rice, pasta and rice, macaroni and cheese and cooked vegetables.
  - Milk, cheese and yogurt.
  - Hummus (chickpea spread) and other bean spreads.
  - Prepared salads such as tuna, chicken, ham, egg and pasta.
  - Freshly-cut fruit and vegetables, such as bagged and peeled baby carrots and leafy greens.
  - Salad dressing dips.

* Food that does not need to be kept cold to stay safe:
  - Peanut butter and other nut butters sandwiches.
  - Whole and dried fruits and vegetables.
  - Fruit commercially packaged in sealed containers or bags, such as diced fruit and applesauce cups.
  - Milk commercially processed (ultra-high temperature pasteurization) is shelf-stable until opened.
  - Whole grain breads and muffins, tortillas and wraps.

Nancy Gal is an extension agent IV with Marion County UF/IFAS Extension Service who teaches nutrition, health and food safety education programs to adults and youth in Marion County. She specializes in type 2 diabetes management, diabetes prevention, cardiovascular disease risk reduction and safe food handling to reduce food-borne illness. Contact her at 352-671-8400 to learn about classes for your group or organization and other educational opportunities.