



HEALTH NEWS FROM DR. YU

Thurston County Public Health & Social Services Department

Lunch Box Safety

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When it comes to packing a school lunch, “keeping it cool at school” doesn’t mean wearing the latest clothes or playing a popular sport. A cool lunch includes healthy foods that your child will eat and enjoy. Getting kids involved in planning and preparing lunches for the next day can build family connectedness and teach them about food safety and nutrition.

If you’re looking for some fun ideas for healthy food choices, the American Dietetic Association’s Kids Eat Right website (www.kidseatright.org) has helpful information for kids of all ages. Add shaved carrots and cucumbers to turkey on a whole grain wrap and slice into fun “wheels”; try a different bread like zucchini bread or banana bread spread with cream cheese or peanut butter; include a small pita bread with a container of tomato sauce and healthy toppings for a make-your-own mini pizza, or prepare quick kid-sized quiches by scrambling eggs with veggies and cheese and baking in muffin tins.

It’s critical to keep things cold! Kids are at risk of serious illness when bacteria grow in perishable foods like meat, dairy, and eggs that are not kept below 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Pack food in insulated containers with enough ice packs or frozen drink boxes to keep them cold until lunch time. Store your lunch items in the refrigerator if possible. Preparing food the night before and placing it in the refrigerator can help insure the food is sufficiently chilled before transporting it.

It is important that the containers you place your food in should be safe too. Some soft plastic (PVC) lunch boxes have been found to contain lead. Read the label to make sure the lunch box or carrying container you use is labeled “lead free.” Nylon and cloth insulated bags are good alternatives to bags made of PVC plastic.

There is a lot of confusing information these days about plastics. One chemical associated with plastic food storage containers is bisphenol A (BPA), a chemical that can mimic the role of natural hormones in our bodies. BPA is of particular concern to children as their bodies are smaller and still developing. The USDA recently announced a renewed research effort to evaluate BPAs more fully. In the meantime, make sure any plastics you use to store food and beverages are listed as BPA free.

A good rule of thumb when evaluating safer plastics is to avoid storing food in plastics with the **recycling Symbol 3 or 7** as these may contain BPA. Do not microwave food in plastic. A microwave safe glass or ceramic container is a safer choice. Do not use clouded or scratched plastic or put plastic containers in the dishwasher which can increase the amount of chemicals getting into your food. There are good alternatives to plastics including cloth washable food wraps, wax paper bags, and stainless steel containers.

As always, thorough hand washing before food preparation is another important aspect of food safety. Making fresh nutritious lunches and packing them safely can provide the benefits of better nutrition and better health all year long.

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