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Packing a safe school lunch requires following food safety guidelines

With schools across the state back in session, those new lunchboxes may be getting a workout along with all of the new pencils, crayons, notebooks and erasers.

Although some children purchase their lunches at school, many opt to bring a lunch from home, said Barbara Brown, Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Service food safety specialist.

“Not only are students learning new things in math and science, it’s a great time to teach children about basic food safety issues when bringing lunch to school,” Brown said. “In fact, food safety is just one aspect of science. Safe home lunches are an important part of the learning process. And to help make food safety fun, involve your child in the process just as you do when deciding what foods will go into the lunchbox.”

Food safety starts at home. It is important to keep your preparation area clean, including all counter surfaces. Also make sure the food containers being used are clean as well. Wash hands and always use clean utensils when packing a lunch.

Clean the surfaces and wash hands before preparing foods, and clean up any spills along the way. Remember to clean the lunchbox itself along with all of the food containers, thermos and eating utensils.

The next thing to keep in mind is food temperature. When packing a lunch it is best to use an insulated lunch box. To help ensure foods stay cold, include a freezer gel pack. If a parent is sending a juice box in the lunch, freeze it the night before and use it as a freezer pack. Juice also can be frozen in reusable plastic drinking

containers and be used as a cold pack in the lunchbox.

“It’s very important to keep perishable foods such as meat, poultry or eggs, nestled close to the freezer gel pack or the frozen juice box,” Brown said. “Frozen gel packs or ice packs will help ensure cold foods remain cold until lunchtime. However, these gel packs don’t normally last all day, so any leftover perishable foods should be thrown away right after lunch or be discarded when your child gets home after school. It’s not safe to keep uneaten food and use it in the next day’s lunch, even if the food still feels cool.”

Although a brown paper bag could be used in place of an insulated bag, the paper bag will not retain the cold as well.

Double bagging can help provide some additional insulation, but when it comes to ensuring food safety, using an insulated bag is the best bet.

“Be sure to keep lunch boxes out of direct sunlight and away from radiators and other heat sources,” she said. “Check to see if your child’s school has a refrigerator available where children can store lunchboxes until it is time to eat.”

Just as it is important to keep cold foods cold, consumers must keep hot foods hot. Use an insulated bottle or thermos for foods such as soup, stew or chili. To help ensure the foods stay as hot as possible, fill the insulated bottle with boiling water and let it sit for a few minutes. Discard the water and fill the bottle with the hot food. Be sure to keep the insulated bottle closed until lunchtime to ensure the food stays nice and hot.