Safe school lunches are cool, literally

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MADISON – A few days from now, school children all over Wisconsin will again make the daily trek to school and many will be carrying a lunch box. Food safety experts at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) have some suggestions for making sure your child's lunch is properly packed and remains safe to eat.

"Many parents worry more about whether their children will eat the food in their lunch boxes than whether that food is safe to eat, but children can be especially vulnerable to food-borne illness," says Dr. Steve Ingham, administrator of DATCP's division of food and recreational safety.

Of an estimated 42,000 annual salmonella infections reported, almost half are infants and school-age children.

"Most importantly, send your kids back to school with basic hygiene knowledge. Teach them to wash their hands before eating and what things to throw out after they are done," Ingham says.

Beyond that, you can take steps to pack a safe lunch:

- Make sure to prepare the food using basic food safety precautions such as using clean cutting boards and utensils, keeping fresh produce and uncooked meat and poultry products separate when handling in the home kitchen, cooking foods to the proper temperature and chilling perishable foods.

- Choose the right lunch container. Use an insulated box or bag instead of a paper bag if you plan to pack perishable food. If your child is prone to losing his or her lunch bag, use paper but make sure to pack items that are not perishable. Some examples of non-perishable items are peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, juice boxes, fresh fruits, potato chips, crackers, and many types of baked goods such as cookies.

- Put an insulated lunch bag in the refrigerator the night before with the lid open so it starts out cold inside and out.

- When assembling the bag, use two cold sources to keep perishable foods cold. You can freeze your child's drink the night before and place it at the bottom of the bag as one of the two cold sources.

- Place perishable foods right above the frozen drink. Add a second cold source, like an ice pack, on top of the perishable foods. Top it off with non-perishable foods, like snack crackers and fresh fruit.

- If you're packing a hot lunch, like soup, use an insulated container to keep it hot. Make sure your child understands not to open it before lunch.

- After lunch, discard leftover perishable food and food packaging.

Find more tips for safe school lunches at foodsafety.gov.

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