

POINTERS FOR PARENTS

Does Your Child's Lunch Box Make The Grade?

(NAPSA)—Even in today's fast-food world, parents are still concerned that their kids eat healthful foods for lunch. Yet, the most nutritious brown bag is not always prepared to withstand the lunch box bug—commonly known as food poisoning.

The American Dietetic Association and the ConAgra Foods Foundation recently conducted a national consumer survey (Impulse Research, 2003) that revealed a majority of parents fail to practice proper food safety habits when packing their child's lunch in the morning. For example, only 31 percent of parents always equip lunches with icepacks to help safeguard popular, and perishable, food items like deli-style sandwiches, dairy-based dips and dressings, cheese snacks, yogurt or milk.

"To help keep kid-favorite foods cold until lunchtime, include a frozen icepack in your child's lunch box," said Carolyn O'Neil, registered dietician and national spokesperson for the ADA/ConAgra Foods Home Food Safety program. "A frozen, individual juice box also can serve as a cold pack while creating a frosty, refreshing drink for later in the day."

Locker Lunches

On average, three to four hours pass from when kids hop on the bus in the morning to the time they dip into their lunch bags at noon. And, with limited access to refrigeration, 94 percent of children typically store their lunch either in a locker, on a shelf or in their backpacks—further increasing the potential risk of foodborne illness.

"As a general rule of thumb,



foods should not sit out unrefrigerated for more than two hours; in hot weather, 90 degrees Fahrenheit or above, the time is reduced to one hour. This is especially important for schools without air conditioning or those with lockers located outside," O'Neil said.

In addition to an icepack, help protect your child's lunch from heat by investing in a well-insulated bag, container or lunchbox. When using paper bags, make sure to "double-bag" it. Remember to instruct your child to throw away all perishable leftovers after lunch, saving only shelf-stable items to snack on before after-school activities.

Backpack-Savvy Snacks

Often, parents pack lunches that include perishable items, such as meat or cheese sandwiches (82 percent), chips and dip (69 percent) or yogurt or yogurt products (42 percent).

Consider substituting these easy and healthy, shelf-stable foods in school lunches:

- Breads/grains: single-serving boxes of cereal, trail mix, energy bars, granola bars, cereal bars, bagels, muffins, crackers, popcorn

and chips

- Fruits and vegetables: carrot and celery sticks and other cut-up raw vegetables, grapes, single-serve applesauce, whole fruit (apples, peaches, bananas), dried fruit mix and juice boxes

- Dairy and alternatives: single-serve milk (freeze first for a cold drink by lunch time), or soy beverage boxes and shelf-stable pudding cups

- Meat and other protein sources: cans of tuna, peanut butter (for sandwiches or with celery and apples), nuts and single-serve packages of peanut butter and crackers.

And, always include a packet of moist towelettes in your child's lunch to serve as a friendly reminder to clean up before lunchtime. Teach your children to carefully wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before eating or handling food.

For More Information on Back-to-School Food Safety

The ADA/ConAgra Foods Home Food Safety...It's in Your Hands program educates consumers that home food safety is a serious issue and provides solutions so Americans can easily and safely handle food in their own kitchens and out-of-doors. This program complements government-sponsored food safety initiatives that speak to the leading critical food-handling violations by emphasizing the following four key messages: 1) Wash hands often; 2) Keep raw meats and ready-to-eat foods separate; 3) Cook to proper temperatures; 4) Refrigerate promptly below 40 degrees F.

For more information, visit www.homefoodsafety.org.