

# t's Picnic Time – Play It Safe

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Is there any one who doesn't like a picnic? When most of us think of a picnic, we think of festive food enjoyed in good company at a favorite outdoor site. When a fine summer afternoon makes everyone "think picnic," you could find yourself organizing one. Whether the outing is a mealtime picnic, a daylong hike, a fishing trip, a camping trip, or a football game tailgate party, never fear. Find the picnic basket and the cooler. Following some simple tips before the picnic begins can keep food poisoning from ruining the outing.

*Activity: Have each member share a favorite "picnic" outing. Include picnic sites and favorite picnic foods.*

When the pleasures of a leisurely picnic are spoiled by food poisoning, the victims are often quick to blame the food. Seldom do they realize that more often the cause of sickness is the handling of the food rather than the food itself.

## Planning the Menu

The most important factor affecting the outcome of your picnic is menu selection. Disease-producing bacteria prefer certain types of food, particularly those high in protein and moisture. Foods like milk products, eggs, meat, poultry, fish, shellfish, cream pies, custards, and homemade potato and meat salads are potentially dangerous.

After preparation, these foods must be kept either hot (140°F or above) or cold (40°F or below). Temperatures between 40°F and 140°F are unsafe temperatures which are referred to as the "Danger Zone." Disease-producing bacteria grow most rapidly at the middle of this temperature range. "Picnic weather" is ideal for bacterial growth. Food

poisoning usually means uncomfortable intestinal flulike symptoms; however, it can be particularly serious for the young, the old, and people with other illnesses. More than 2 million people are affected every year. If you do not have the proper equipment for maintaining a safe temperature, eliminate potentially dangerous foods from the picnic. Instead, plan your picnic around canned, packaged, and fresh foods that can be prepared at the picnic site.

**Safe Take-along Foods:** Canned meat and poultry that can be opened at the picnic site and eaten immediately are safe choices. Fresh, firm fruits and vegetables also travel well. Washing them before packing helps to remove soil you can see, plus bacteria, viruses, and insecticide sprays you can't see. Packaged crackers, breads, and cookies also are good choices.

Many commercial sandwich producers have learned that bacterial growth in sandwiches can be reduced by using frozen slices of bread and chilled (40°F or below) fillings. The sandwiches should be wrapped tightly in a plastic film wrap and placed in an insulated cooler to stay cold. When mealtime arrives, the sandwiches are ready to eat.

### **Mayonnaise — Not a Food Poisoning Villain:**

While all mayonnaise-based salads should be kept chilled, the mayonnaise you buy at the store is not a food poisoning villain. Its high acid content actually slows bacterial growth. If prepared without lemon juice or vinegar however, homemade mayonnaise could cause a foodborne illness. When nonacid foods, such as chicken, tuna, potatoes, or pasta, are added to mayonnaise, you have perfect conditions for bacteria to grow.

**Shopping for Picnic Food:** A safe outing starts with shopping for the food. Select perishable foods last at

the store and immediately take them home and place them in the refrigerator. Using a portable ice chest for transporting perishable food from the grocery during hot weather is a good idea. Never leave perishables in a hot car while you run other errands or finish packing for the trip.

**Cold Storage of Picnic Food:** Perishable products can be kept in the refrigerator (40°F or lower) for a few days. For longer storage before your picnic, food items should be wrapped tightly in heavy freezer foil or put in freezer bags and placed into the freezer. The freezer needs to have a temperature of 0°F or lower. Note that mayonnaise-based meat, poultry, and fish salads as well as tomatoes and lettuce do not freeze well.

Do not refrigerate food in deep containers. Food acts as an insulator, and the center of large masses of food can be warm for long periods of time even though the outer edges may be almost frozen. Use shallow pans and do not fill the pans more than 3 or 4 inches deep.

*Activity: Select two containers holding approximately 2 cups of liquid. One container should be deep and one shallow. Fill each container with at least 1 cup boiling water (210°F). Let the container sit for two minutes. Using two meat thermometers, test the temperature of the water in each container after the two minutes. The temperature of the shallow container will read lower than the temperature of the water in the deep container.*

**Thawing — Do It the Night Before:** Contrary to common practice, it is not safe to thaw meat and poultry on the kitchen counter. Bacteria can multiply dangerously in the outer layers before inner areas are thawed. Instead, allow plenty of time for larger cuts to thaw. Take meat or poultry out of the freezer and put it in the refrigerator a night or two before you need it. Small cuts will usually thaw in the refrigerator overnight. It is not a problem if the meat is still partially frozen when you are ready to leave. Partially frozen meat can be cooked longer at the picnic.

**Cook Meats Thoroughly:** Cook everything thoroughly. Hamburger patties and pork chops should be cooked to an internal temperature of 160°F. Chicken needs to be cooked to 180°F. Steaks must be cooked

to at least 145°F. If you plan to purchase take-out foods, such as fried chicken or barbecued beef, the food should be eaten within two hours of pickup. Otherwise, buy cooked foods ahead of time and chill them thoroughly before packing them in the cooler.

When taking foods off the grill, don't put the cooked items on the same platter or tray that was used to hold the raw meat. Raw meat juices can contain bacteria that could cross-contaminate safely cooked foods.

*Activity: Plan a picnic menu. Have members develop a shopping list for the menu and divide list into perishable and nonperishable foods. Discuss kitchen storage of menu items before leaving for the picnic. Following are three menu suggestions:*

- Grilled frankfurter or hamburgers
- Potatoes baked in embers
- Buttermilk roll
- Bread and butter pickles
- Carrots, celery sticks
- Fresh fruit

- Cold fried chicken
- Potato salad
- Tossed salad
- Marble cake
- Watermelon

- Hot or cold barbecued ribs
- Grilled or roasted corn
- Coleslaw
- Oatmeal cookies
- Peaches

## Food Safety

Take what you know about kitchen cleanliness to the picnic with you. Scrub your hands before starting food preparation and between steps. If water is not available, use disposable wet wipes to clean your hands before working with food. To keep bacteria on raw meat and poultry from spreading, wash your hands again after working with raw meat or poultry and before handling other food. Thoroughly scrub work surfaces after raw meats are cut or where raw meat juices have dripped. Be sure to use clean

sponges, dish clothes, and rubber gloves. These items used over and over can spread germs.

Remove cooked meat and poultry with clean utensils and place it on a fresh plate for serving. Don't reuse knives and other utensils, plates, or bowls you used with the raw product for either the cooked meat or other food without cleaning thoroughly first. Poor sanitation is one way to spread harmful bacteria.

Do not buy freshly prepared picnic foods more than 24 hours in advance. Time can be your enemy. Remember, refrigeration does not kill disease-producing bacteria; it only slows their growth. Long storage also will reduce food quality. When preparing food in advance, refrigerate cooked foods like chicken, potatoes, and ham as soon as they stop steaming. Cooling foods to room temperature before refrigerating encourages bacterial growth. Chill all perishable food in the refrigerator before packing. Then transport it to the picnic in an insulated cold storage container.

**Transporting Cold Food:** For a relaxed, worry-free picnic, keep your perishable food in a cooler. The cooler should be well insulated and packed with ice, or you can use freezer-packs to keep cold food below 40°F. For best cooling, leave room for air to circulate inside; don't overload the cooler. Cold drinks in cans help keep other food cool, too. Arrange to carry the cooler inside the air-conditioned car rather than in the trunk of the car.

For longer cold storage, prechill your cooler before packing by filling it with ice or ice water and allowing it to stand for an hour. Water frozen in clean milk containers makes convenient blocks of ice to prechill the cooler.

At the picnic, keep the cooler out of the direct sun and cover it with a blanket, towel, or sleeping bag. Reduce the traffic in and out of the picnic cooler by opening it only when necessary. To minimize the time the cooler is open, pack the food that will be eaten first at the top of the container.

**Serving Cold Food:** Except when it's being served, the food should be kept in the cooler. Just like a refrigerator at home when the power is off, the more times the cooler is opened, the more cold air escapes. Once the ice melts, the cooler won't be able

to keep food safe. Keep cold drinks in a separate cooler to avoid constantly opening the one containing perishable foods.

If you've packed cooked food in several small containers, you can serve one and keep the others cold for second helpings. Leave raw meat in the cooler, too, removing only the amount that will fit on the grill.

**Transporting Hot Food:** Keep hot foods above 140°F to ensure safety. Hot foods can be transported short distances right from the stove in insulated containers (an extra ice chest works well). A thoroughly cooked casserole usually will stay safe and warm if you insulate it well. Try several layers of aluminum wrap, followed by newspapers, and a towel. Put the wrapped casserole in the bottom of an insulated container or cardboard box, fitting other items around it. Serve as soon as you reach your destination. For longer trips, hot foods will need to be refrigerated at 40°F or below and reheated just before the meal.

**Keeping Perishable Food Cold:** Put perishable foods back in the cooler as soon as you finish eating. Don't leave them out while you go for a swim or hike. If you are transporting perishables home after the picnic, remember to keep the covered cooler under a tree or in a shaded area and then put it in the passenger area of the car. If you were gone no more than four or five hours, and your perishables were on ice except when cooked and served, you should be able to save the leftovers. If there is some doubt on food safety, it is much safer to discard the perishables. Remember: when in doubt, throw it out!

## Perfect Packing

After you have decided on the menu and supplies, you'll want to pack your picnic efficiently. Following these tips will help you prevent spoiled food, broken dishes, and spills, and will help you avoid confusion when it's time to serve the food.

- Don't take too much food. Take just enough for each person and very little excess.
- In a picnic basket, pack the things you'll need last at the bottom and those you'll need first at the top. Set fragile dishes on top of sturdy items

to reduce the risk of chipping, cracking, or breaking the dishes.

- In a cooler, follow the sequence rule as nearly as possible, but put perishables and cold drinks near the bottom of the chest to keep them cool.
- In a cooler with ice at the bottom, you can nestle bottles, cans, and sealed cartons right into the ice.
- Keep sandwiches, meats, salads, and other foods cool but away from moisture. It is helpful to have a shelf resting inside the cooler above the ice level to do this. If your cooler doesn't have a shelf, you can easily make one out of 1/8-inch perforated hardboard.
- Foods that can leak or spill should be packed in jars with tightly screwed-on lids or in containers that can be sealed shut with snap-on tops. Use masking tape to keep lids in place if there's any doubt.
- Wrap foods in aluminum foil rather than plastic wrap. Aluminum foil stays in place better and is a better insulator. Label packages for easy identification.
- Group flatware by place setting and wrap in individual napkins. This makes the picnic basket neater and simplifies serving. Cloth napkins are useful as protective wrappers for glassware.

*Activity: Have a picnic lunch for members. Decide on a menu and have each member bring one item for the picnic lunch. During the lesson, pack the picnic in coolers and a picnic basket to demonstrate how to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold.*

#### Resources:

*Safe Food to Go — A Guide to Packing Lunches, Picnicking & Camping Out*, USDA Home & Garden Bulletin Number 242, Food Safety and Inspection Service, USDA, Washington, D.C. 20250-3700

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