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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Don't Let Food-borne Illness Ruin Back to School Lunches

What do fresh haircuts, new clothes, a backpack full of school supplies and yellow school buses all have in common? If you guessed the start of a new school year, you are correct! Now that school is officially under way, it's important to ensure proper nutrition for active minds and bodies. Packed school lunches are not only more cost effective, but they can also harbor harmful bacteria if not prepared properly.

One of the biggest issues with packing lunches is the temperature control. It is imperative to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Otherwise, harmful bacteria can multiply and cause foodborne illness. An easy way to reduce this risk is to purchase freezer gel packs, insulated bottles and insulated lunchboxes or bags. To keep hot foods hot, such as soup, fill an insulated bottle with boiling water for a few minutes, then empty the water and add the heated food. Cold perishable foods should be packed in insulated bags or lunchboxes with at least one freezer pack gel pack. Making lunches the night before and storing them in the refrigerator or freezer overnight provides additional protection from spoilage. Frozen lunches and packaged drinks usually thaw out by lunchtime and the frozen drink can act as an ice pack in the lunch bag. Be sure to add lettuce, tomatoes and mayonnaise later, as they do not freeze well. All other pre-packaged lunches that include meat, cheese and condiments must be kept refrigerated.

Children love additional non-perishable food items in school lunches, such as canned fruit or puddings with pop-top lids, peanut butter, jams and crackers. Whole fresh fruits, such as apples, oranges and bananas are great for children to eat and do not require refrigeration; however, cut up fruit must be kept cold.

It is important to remember proper cleanliness before packing any type of lunch for your child. Be sure to wash your hands, food preparation surfaces and utensils with warm, soapy water. Remember to wash lunchboxes, insulated bags and bottles, and freezer packs before using and wash them again after each use. Wash all raw fruits and vegetables, and handle other perishables like lunch meat and cheese carefully. Wrap cold foods in plastic tightly, and be sure to throw away used food packaging and paper bags to avoid contaminating other food.

Remind your child to try to store his or her lunch away from sources of heat and out of direct sunlight at school. Remind them of the importance of washing hands before eating, with warm, soapy water for 30 seconds, or by singing the "Happy Birthday" song twice. Instruct them that it is important to throw away perishable foods and not save them for another time, as they will go bad. For any after-school activities, pack non-perishable items such as raisins, granola, crackers or pretzels.

For transportation, insulated, soft-sided lunch boxes or bags are ideal for keeping cold foods cold, but cold, metal or plastic lunch boxes or paper bags can also be used safely, as long as certain measures are taken. When using paper bags, double bag the lunch to provide extra insulation. At the end of the day, all paper bags should be thrown away and all other types of lunch containers should be washed so they will be clean for the next day.

The school year is officially kicked off and it is important to pack nutritious and safely-packed lunches to help your student succeed in the classroom. For further information about packing school lunches, contact the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the USDA at www.fsis.usda.gov, or the partnership for Food Safety at www.fightbac.org. For tips and healthy lunch and snack ideas, visit www.choosemyplate.gov. For more information about this or any other public health issue, please visit our website at www.ccthd.org or by calling (860)721-2822.

