

TRAVELING WITH FOOD

Factsheet | HGIC 3601 | Updated: Mar 15, 2017

Many families enjoy taking food along on trips for picnics and to keep little stomachs (and mouths) full while driving in the car. However, improperly stored food could result in an unwanted vacation souvenir — foodborne illness. Packing and storing food with food safety in mind can prevent this vacation disaster, and it is not that difficult. Just remember the “Five Rules of Traveling with Food.”

Plan Ahead

- A well-stocked cooler is a must! Have plenty of ice or frozen gel-packs on hand before you start packing.
- What to take? Some foods don't require refrigeration — peanut butter and jelly and some cheeses, for example. Perishable foods, like meat, poultry, eggs and fish do require refrigeration, so if you are taking summer salads, making sandwiches on the road, or bringing food to cook over the course of your vacation, plan to keep them on ice in your cooler throughout the trip.



Pack Safely

- Pack perishables directly from the refrigerator to the cooler. You can pack meat and poultry while it is still frozen. It will thaw during the trip, extending its safety and shelf life.
- A full cooler will maintain its cold temperature longer than one that is only partially filled. Pack the remaining space with more ice or with fruit and non-perishable foods.
- Securely wrap or bag foods that may drip or leak, particularly raw meat, poultry or fish. Keep these from contact with ready-to-eat foods or beverages.
- For longer trips take two coolers, one for the day's lunch and snacks, the other for perishables to be used later. Keep big and little hands out of the perishables cooler.

A well-stocked cooler is a must! Have plenty of ice or frozen gel-packs on hand before you start packing.

Adair Hoover, ©2017 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Preserve the Cold

Put the cooler in the passenger section of the car instead of in the hot trunk. Frequently opening the cooler will cause the inside temperature to decrease. Preserve the cold temperature of the cooler by replenishing the ice as soon as it starts melting.

If you bring along beverages, consider packing the beverages in a separate cooler so that the frequent access to the cooler does not impact the temperature of your stored perishable foods.

When you have reached your destination, make sure that the cooler is placed in the shade and not exposed to direct sunlight. If there is no natural shade, place a blanket, large towel, or a beach umbrella over it.

Pitch the Warm

Pitch any foods that warm above refrigerator temperature (40 °F). Food poisoning bacteria grow rapidly at warm temperatures. At the end of the day, if the ice has melted and the food feels warm, discard any meat or poultry left over. Non-perishables like fruits, vegetables, breads and drinks do not require refrigeration and should be okay.

It is not safe to eat perishable food after it sits out for more than 2 hours. In temperatures higher than 90 °F, perishable foods are not safe after 1 hour. Be sure to dispose of foods that are left out for more than 2 hours (or 1 hour), or pack them back into the cooler to bring them back to a safe storage temperature.

Keep Hands and Utensils Clean

- Protect your family from disease-causing bacteria by keeping hands and utensils clean. If soap and water will not be available, pack some moist towelettes. Bag and set aside dishes and utensils to wash with hot soapy water when you reach your destination.
- Packing food for the trip is a money-and time-saver for today's road warriors. Re-sealable bottles of juice or sodas are more economical than individual cans or bottles. Bring a plastic cup for each member of the family. Store ice for drinks in a leak-proof, resealable container in the cooler. After lunch, repack the cooler with non-perishables to fill it up.
- Using family-sized bags of chips and snacks help you save money and also cut down on your trash.
- Offering a small snack every hour or two will prevent boredom during long car trips. Offer a snack before your children announce that they are hungry!
- Some snacks are better than others in the car. Fresh and dried fruit, cheese and soft cookies are fairly easy for little hands to manage without making a mess.

If this document didn't answer your questions, please contact HGIC at hgic@clemson.edu or 1-888-656-9988.

Original Author(s)

Pamela Schmutz, Former Retired HGIC Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University

E.H. Hoyle, PhD, Retired Extension Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University

Revisions by:

Andrew McCullough, Food Science Student and HGIC Intern, Clemson Extension, Clemson University

This information is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement of brand names or registered trademarks by the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service is implied, nor is any discrimination intended by the exclusion of products or manufacturers not named. All recommendations are for South Carolina conditions and may not apply to other areas. Use pesticides only according to the directions on the label. All recommendations for pesticide use are for South Carolina only and were legal at the time of publication, but the status of registration and use patterns are subject to change by action of state and federal regulatory agencies. Follow all directions, precautions and restrictions that are listed.

Copyright © 2020 Clemson University
Clemson Cooperative Extension | 103 Barre Hall Clemson, SC 29634
864-986-4310 | HGIC@clemson.edu