Traveling with Food

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.

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 avail-
  able, 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.

**Sources:**
1. The National Food Safety Database. *Food Safety on the Road*.
3. United States Department of Agriculture, *Handling Food Safety on
   the Road*. Food Safety Education. June 2013. 
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