

Ask an Expert: Tips for the Perfect Picnic

A close-up photograph of a wooden picnic table with a red and white checkered blanket draped over it. The wood is dark and textured, and the blanket is bright red and white. The text is overlaid on the image in white, bold, sans-serif font.

ASK AN EXPERT:

TIPS FOR THE
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Whether you're throwing together a quick picnic or planning an outing in advance, we've got some great tips to make your summer picnics a success.

Picnic Season is Here

The summer season brings plenty of opportunity for fun, and picnics are a perfect way to get out and enjoy the outdoors without going too far or spending a lot of money. Picnicking can fit almost any budget and be as simple or elaborate as you want it to be. Some of the best picnics happen on the spur of the moment and don't need a lot of planning. No picnic basket? No problem. Anything that will hold your supplies will do.

Pack Your Picnic with Food Safety in Mind

If you will be gone longer than 2 hours from departure to eating, plan to pack a cooler. After 2 hours at room temperature (1 hour if temperatures are around 90 F), harmful bacteria that cause food poisoning rapidly multiply. USDA guidelines say cold foods should be kept as close to 40 F as possible and hot food should be kept above 140 F.

Cooler Tips

If you are planning to make picnics a mainstay of your summer activity, consider investing in a cooler-on-wheels for portability. To help keep foods cold, chill them in the refrigerator before packing and keep them in the cooler until serving time.

Get double duty from your cooler space. Fill empty drink bottles half full of water or juice and freeze. The frozen

drinks will act as ice packs to keep the picnic cool in transit. At your destination, top off the bottles with water or a drink to sip through your meal.

Location, Location, Location

When planning your picnic food items, consider where you are going. Even if it's just to the park, it will help you prepare by considering the setting. Avoid anything that gets drippy, limp or wimpy in warm weather. Gelatin salad is a perfect example of what not to take, and even tossed salads will wilt if left in the sun or warm weather very long.

Menu Tips

For a no-fuss menu, have a fix-your-own sandwich bar. Fill plastic containers with pre-sliced sandwich fixings, such as lettuce, tomatoes, cheeses, meats, bell peppers, olives, mushrooms, onions and spinach. Set out hearty breads, crusty rolls or tortilla wraps and condiments. To add a gourmet touch, splurge on a couple of interesting spreads, such as pesto, tapenade or flavored soft cheese. Everyone can build a custom sandwich for a fraction of what you'd pay at the deli.

Sometimes the fun of a summer picnic is the spontaneity, and having fruits and vegetables on hand makes packing a breeze. Simple finger food, like carrots, celery, sliced jicama and sliced bell peppers are a great cool, crispy addition to any picnic plate and a great way to bring in vegetables. Add a vegetable dip and you have a quick and easy side dish.

If you plan to picnic frequently this summer, make a standard packing list for spur-of-the-moment jaunts, and keep your pantry stocked with food that is suitable for a picnic.

Basic Picnic Supply List

- Napkins, plates, cups, dinnerware
- Garbage bags
- Plastic bags (like Ziploc)
- Serving utensils and cutting knives
- Can opener
- Cutting mat or cutting board
- Salt and pepper, packets of condiments
- Blanket to sit on
- Hand sanitizer, wet wipes or a wet washcloth in a plastic bag
- Paper towels
- Insect repellent
- Extra water
- Balls, games, Frisbees, etc.

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Don't Get Sick This Grilling Season!



Summer is the time for outdoor picnics, barbecues and unfortunately, food poisoning. Avoid getting sick by following these suggestions!

Eating outdoors in warm weather can be a food safety challenge. Bacteria in food multiply faster at temperatures between 40°F and 140°F. Knowing these 7 basic food safety tips will keep you safe this summer.

1. Wash hands.

“Hand washing is THE single most effective way to prevent the spread of disease,” according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It’s really simple – make sure to wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. To help kids learn this, try singing the ABC song with them while they wash. Cleaning up is especially important after using the bathroom and before cooking or eating. Oftentimes you find yourself outdoors with no bathroom in the summer. You can use a water jug, some soap and paper towels. Moist disposable towelettes are also good for cleaning your hands.

2. Keep raw food separate from cooked food.

You take the raw meat on a plate to the grill, right? But remember that you do not want to use that same plate to put the cooked meat on. This is known as cross contamination and can cause food-borne illness. Keep utensils and surfaces clean.

3. Marinate food in the refrigerator, not out on the counter.

Marinating can make meat tender and tasty. But if you want to use some of the marinade as a sauce on the cooked food, reserve a separate portion. Don't reuse marinade that contained raw meat.

4. Cook food thoroughly.

A meat thermometer can really help in making sure meat is cooked to a safe temperature. Steaks should reach 145 degrees and then be allowed to rest for 3 minutes. Chicken should be cooked to at least 165°F. Hamburgers should be cooked to 160°F. If a thermometer is not available, make sure hamburgers are brown all the way through, not pink.

5. Refrigerate and freeze food right away.

It can be hard to remember while a party is going on, but food should not be left out of the cooler or off the grill for more than 2 hours. It's especially important to remember NOT to leave food out for more than one hour when the temperature is above 90°F.

6. Keep hot food hot.

Hot food should be kept at or above 140°F. Hot food should be wrapped well and placed in an insulated container – this will keep the heat in. If you have purchased something like fried chicken at a deli, try to eat it within two hours. Bacteria multiply rapidly after that and can make you sick. Don't forget to pack your meat thermometer. When re-heating food, be sure it reaches 165°F.

7. Keep cold food cold.

Cold food should be held at or below 40°F. Think about potato

salad and similar foods. Keep them on ice in a cooler and don't set them out for long periods of time in the heat. Those are the basic tips to remember. If you have ever suffered from food-borne illness, you know how miserable it is. Follow these simple steps to keep your food safe and enjoy your summer barbecues and camping trips.

This article was written by Darlene Christensen



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References:

U.S. Food and Drug Administration, [Barbecue Basics: Tips to Prevent Foodborne Illness.](#)
