

Healthy School Lunches

Plan Ahead...

When you pack a school lunch, it needs to be something fun, fast and nutritious. Planning ahead and involving your child in the planning helps to teach them about good food choices. This also increases the chances that they will eat the lunch you send.

To make the planning process go smoother, consider these suggestions:

- Take your child to the grocery store and let them show you what they like to eat.
- Look for many prepackaged foods such as baby carrots, individual fruit cups, low-fat pudding cups, dried fruits, granola bars or boxed 100% juices.
- If the price of prepackaged foods is too expensive, spend Sunday afternoon with your child making your own individual bags of goodies.
- Sit down with your child and make a weekly school lunch menu. Make sure each lunch includes foods from three or four food groups.
- Pack as much of the lunch as possible the night before. Give your child responsibility for this as appropriate for age.

With a little imagination, a school lunch can rise above the sandwich made on white bread...

- Whole Grain bagels, rolls, pita pockets, English muffins, raisin bread or tortillas are a healthy base for a nutritious school lunch.
- Try varying the type of bread each day to make lunch more appealing and interesting.
- Lean cuts of meat such as ham, roast beef or turkey are favorites with kids.
- Consider pasta salad, chicken salad or tuna salad served in pita bread or in a small cup or container. Just be certain it can be kept cold to prevent food spoilage.
- Peanut butter and jelly is always a favorite. Not only is it a good protein source, but it does not have to be refrigerated. Jazz up a peanut butter sandwich by mixing the peanut butter with some granola or wheat germ. If your child requests this sandwich day after day, provide different snack foods for variety.
- You might be surprised how well your child will take to raw vegetables, especially if they are packed with a container of low-fat or fat-free Ranch dressing.
- Offer your child the opportunity to taste raw squash, zucchini, broccoli, green peppers or celery.
- Consider ready-to-eat fruits like dried apricots, raisins, individual containers of fruit cocktail in light syrup, cubed melon or grapes, instead of a fruit that needs peeling, such as an orange or a kiwi.
- Skim or 1% milk is recommended as the lunch beverage.
- It is a good idea not to pack chips, cookies, cakes or candy in your child's lunch, at least not on a daily basis. Consider pretzels, graham crackers, nuts, trail mix, mini rice cakes, popcorn, granola bars, fig bars or yogurt-covered raisins. Tuck a surprise sweet treat in the lunch box once a week.
- To keep your child from trading lunches, write notes on the napkins that say, "I love you," or tell a joke.

Mix-And-Match for a Healthful Lunch

Bored with the same old sandwich? Keep a variety of foods in your pantry, refrigerator and freezer to mix-and-match for innovative lunches.

Start with one...	Add...	Top with any...	Add...	Snacks
whole grain bread	turkey	broccoli sprouts	mustard	baby carrots
7-grain bread	lean ham	1 slice cheese	low-fat mayo	raw broccoli
whole grain pita	lean roast beef	spinach leaves	low-fat	raisins
whole grain bagel	hummus	lettuce	dressing	celery
whole grain mini-bagel	tuna-salad	cucumber slices		low-fat dip
whole grain roll	sliced chicken	tomato slices		whole fruit
whole grain tortilla	roasted	roasted red pepper		no sugar added
	eggplant	hot pepper rings		applesauce
		onion		pineapple spear
		shredded carrot		pretzels
				lowfat popcorn
				lowfat granola
				bar
				grapes
				low-fat yogurt

What about those convenient lunch kits such as "Lunchable"?

Typically, more than half of the calories in those lunches come from fat; however, the low-fat versions are better. Still, the sodium content is quite high at 1200-1800 mg per kit. (The recommended sodium intake per day is 2400 mg). The cost of these kits is also high at \$3.00 to \$7.00 a pound. Consider purchasing your own divided plastic containers and filling them with low-fat meat, low-fat cheese, crackers, pretzels, Goldfish crackers, baby carrots and fresh or dried fruit.