

Loading the Lunchbox

By: Mary Rose Dimmey, RD, LD; Edited by: Erika Ford, RD, LD

As another school year begins, it is time to think again about packing school lunches. As you do so, keep in mind what foods fill your child's bag or lunch tray and be sure to include healthy options. Lunch not only fuels your kid's body for sports and other after-school activities but it also allows them to have more concentration and perform better in school. Packing a safe, healthy lunch that kids also will eat is a constant challenge. Here are a few helpful tips.



Image courtesy of [Ambro] at FreeDigitalPhotos.net

Student Involvement

Having kids involved in preparing meals or in choosing a healthy school lunch allows them to have a say in what they eat and will give them a vested interest. This will lead kids to be more willing to eat a healthful lunch. In addition, this will allow them an opportunity to develop healthy eating habits.

Get Organized and Make a Plan

Knowing ahead of time what items to pack will not only increase the amount of nutrient-dense foods included but will also save time when packing. Try making a list at the beginning of the week as to what items you will pack. For school meals, review the week's menu with kids and have them help make the decision.

Add Variety

Vitamins and minerals play a significant role in health at any age. However, they are even more important in school-age children due to growth and development being at its peak during this time. In order to ensure children are receiving all necessary nutrients, it is important to include a variety of all food groups.

Remember to Pack:	Example:
Whole grains	Turkey, lettuce, and mustard on whole grain or wheat bread
Lean meat/protein	Easy to peel clementine and pepper slices with hummus
Fresh fruit and/or vegetables	Low-fat string cheese and fat-free chocolate milk
Low-fat dairy	

Keep Snacks Healthy

Adding a snack to your child's lunch may add a sense of reward at lunchtime, increasing their acceptance. However, packing low-fat, low sodium options such as a granola bar, air-popped popcorn, or low-fat, low salt crackers or pretzels will help the meals to stay healthy.

Get Creative

For younger kids, try making snacks fun such as bugs on a log (top celery with peanut butter and add dried fruit such as raisins or cranberries as bugs). A little creativity may spark an interest for younger children and may be a project they have fun creating themselves.



Image courtesy of [winnond] at FreeDigitalPhotos.net

Safety First

When packing lunches, be sure to follow these food handling guidelines to keep kids from getting sick. First, it is always a good idea to wash hands before eating. Remind kids to do so or pack a hand sanitizer in their bag. Washing lunch boxes with warm soapy water will also help prevent the spreading of bacteria. In addition, make sure cold foods stay cold. If refrigeration is not available, use an insulated bag and ice packs for cold items. (Or try using a frozen bottled water to keep food cold. It can then be used as a beverage during lunch). Use shelf stable foods such as granola bars, dried fruit or peanut butter and crackers if keeping foods cold is not an option.

Looking for some new, fun and healthy ways to spice up that brown bag? Look no further!

- Chicken salad (with grapes and almonds) on a whole wheat pita with spinach and tomato. Banana. Carrot sticks and dip. Low fat milk.
- Peanut butter and jelly on a mini whole wheat bagel. Fruit kabobs with strawberries and pineapple. Fat free cheese stick. Water.
- Mixed greens with a hard boiled egg and light dressing. Whole grain chips. Mandarin Oranges. Fat free chocolate milk.
- Turkey, guacamole, and Swiss cheese on a whole wheat wrap. Cherry tomatoes. Unsweetened cinnamon applesauce. Vegetable juice.
- Low sodium ham wrapped around whole wheat pretzels with mustard to dip. Grapes. Cucumber slices. Water flavored with lemon and raspberries.

Following these simple tips may encourage healthy eating in kids and lead them to a productive school year. To learn more, contact a registered dietitian in your area and/or check out www.eatright.org/kids.



Mary Rose is a registered and licensed dietitian working in North Central WV. As one of the nation's food and nutrition experts, she is committed to improving the health of her community. To find a registered dietitian in your area, visit www.eatright.org and click on "Find a Registered Dietitian."