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Healthy Lunchboxes

Practical tips for you and your children on
how to prepare a healthy lunchbox

 safefood

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Good food habits set early in childhood can last a lifetime.

Lunches provide around one third of our daily nutritional needs, so it's important to put some thought and planning into them. Here are some tips on how to prepare a healthy lunchbox that your child will eat and enjoy.

Tired of packing the same old lunch? - Keep it varied

- Include a **wide variety of foods** – fruit and vegetables, starchy foods, protein and dairy
- Add interest to the lunchbox – try some of the following ideas:
 - **Vary the types of bread** for example, pitta bread, bagels, wholemeal rolls – keep a stock in the freezer
 - **Cook extra rice or pasta** in the evening – these can make great salads
 - **Try a pasta salad or filled tortillas**
- Fluids are important for children – up to 6 cups of fluid should be encouraged daily. **Milk and plain water** are the best options. Brightly coloured bottles can make plain water more interesting!
- **Get your child involved** in packing lunches. Let them help choose some element of their lunch. Pick a colourful lunchbox or let them decorate one with stickers
- Children often need to see and taste new foods several times before they accept them, so **try out new ideas at teatime** or the weekend before including them in a lunchbox

Please note that your child's school may have a policy relating to food allergies, which does not permit particular food items to be brought to school.

Make sure it's clean and safe

Remember that sandwiches containing meat or other foods that require refrigeration should be kept as cold as possible until lunch.

Help keep lunches cool and safe by following these tips:

- An insulated box or bag can be used to help keep lunches cool.
- It is important that lunches are not kept in a warm place such as near radiators or in direct sunlight
- Throw away any perishable food that hasn't been eaten at the end of the day
- Wash and dry reusable water bottles, lids and lunchboxes every day in warm soapy water
- To keep the cool air in, minimize the number of times your child needs to open the lunchbox, by packing other food items that don't need to be kept cool separately
- Cut back on single use plastics like cling-film and use reusable containers.

And last, always remember to wash your hands before eating lunch.



Here's what should go in a healthy lunchbox

Vegetables, salad and fruit

At least one portion from the fruit and vegetables food group...

- 1 medium apple, orange, banana, pear or similar size fruit
- 2 small fruits – plums, kiwis, mandarins or similar size fruit
- A small glass (150ml) of unsweetened fruit juice
- Half a tin (3 tablespoons or 4 dessertspoons) of fruit in its own juice
- 1 small bunch of grapes (10 grapes)
- 1 small salad (for example, dessert bowl sized salad of lettuce, tomato, cucumber and celery sticks)
- 3 tablespoons or 4 dessertspoons of vegetables (for example, chopped or grated carrots)
- A bowl of homemade vegetable soup in a thermos flask for older children
- A small pot of fruit salad
- A small salad box

Did you know?

To avoid soggy sandwiches put juicy vegetables between some lettuce and other sandwich fillings for example, cheese. For younger children cutting fruit into manageable size chunks will encourage them to eat more fruit.

Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts

One portion from the meat and meat alternatives food group...

- 2 slices (50–75g) of cooked meat
- 1–2 eggs (hard-boiled, sliced or mashed)
- A small can (100g) of tuna, salmon, mackerel or sardines
- 4 tablespoons of hummus - try out as a dip with carrots or celery

Note: Fish such as tinned tuna or salmon should be included in the lunchbox at least once a week – remove any bones

Did you know?

Lean cuts of meat such as chicken breast are lower in salt than processed meats such as ham and bacon. Choose lean meat more often than processed meat.





Wholemeal cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice

One portion from the bread and cereals group which would be...

- 2 thin slices of wholemeal bread
- 1 small wholemeal bread roll
- 1 wholemeal tortilla wrap
- 1 wholemeal pitta bread
- 4–6 wholemeal crackers or breadsticks
- 1 cup of cooked brown rice, pasta or couscous
- 1 small wholemeal bagel

Did you know?

Including wholegrain varieties of breads and cereals in our diet can help us feel fuller for longer and prevent constipation.



Milk, yoghurt and cheese

One portion from the dairy products food group...

- 1 glass or mini-carton of milk (200ml)
- A pot of natural or low-fat yoghurt (125ml)
- 2 cheese triangles
- 2 thumbs (25g) of cheese such as cheddar, edam or gouda varieties

Note: Low-fat dairy products are suitable for children over two years of age.

Did you know?

Dairy products are especially important in the diets of children and teenagers as they provide calcium to support growing bones and teeth. Low-fat natural yoghurt with fruit is the best option.

Suitable drinks for children



It is important that children take in enough fluids during the day. If they do not drink enough, they may become dehydrated, thirsty, tired and weak. Drinks should always be included for break-time and lunch.

Plain water and milk are the most suitable drinks for children. Because of its natural sugar content, unsweetened fruit juice should only be consumed with meals and ideally diluted (one part juice to ten parts water).

If you are unsure about whether a drink contains added sugar, check the ingredients list. Less common terms for sugar that may appear on the ingredients list are sucrose, fructose, glucose, maltose, dextrose and syrup. See our table for the low down on suitable drinks.



- Milk (low-fat preferably)
- Plain water

Plain water and milk are the best choice at any time.



- Unsweetened fruit juice (fruit juice from concentrate is suitable also if it does not contain added sugar)
- Flavoured milk*
- Diluted sugar-free squash
- Yoghurt or milk drinks*
- Smoothies**
- Fruit juice drink (unsweetened)

Limit to a small glass once a day and its best to have it at mealtimes.



- Fruit Juice drink (sweetened)
- Fizzy drinks (including diet versions)

Don't provide important nutrients and are not tooth friendly.

* Compare brands and choose those that are lower in sugar

** Homemade smoothies using whole fruit are best

5-day lunchbox planner

We often end up putting the same things in the lunchbox everyday. Keeping lunchbox contents varied makes lunch more enjoyable. The following planner shows you some examples of snacks and lunch items.

Monday

1 medium wholemeal bread roll with tomato and cheese



Handful of carrot sticks

Pot of low-fat yoghurt



Tuesday

Small wholemeal pitta bread with tuna and sweetcorn



1/2 wholemeal scone



Wednesday

2 tablespoons of wholemeal pasta with 1 tablespoon of tomatoes and vegetables



2 wholemeal crackers with low-fat cheddar cheese



Thursday

2 slices of wholemeal bread with cooked ham and lettuce

Slices of pepper, cucumber, sugar snap peas or mangetout



Pot of low-fat yoghurt



Friday

Wholemeal tortilla wrap with chicken, sliced peppers and lettuce



Small tub of stewed fruit

6 cherry tomatoes



Remember:

- Use low-fat spread, low-fat mayonnaise or relish instead of full-fat options
- Smaller portions for smaller children

Ideas for healthy snacks and lunches are only a click away

Healthy eating policies

Schools recognise that children who eat a nutritious lunch in school are better able to concentrate and learn in the classroom. For this reason most schools discourage foods such as chocolate, sweets and crisps. Many have policies to support families to make better choices when planning and preparing school lunches.

Ask your school if they have a policy.

Tasty, healthy lunches

Check out the **safefood** website for easy ways to choose a balanced nutritious and tasty lunch for your children each day.

For healthy snack ideas search

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