

Tips for a Healthier Lunch Box

Packing a healthy lunch for your children is a great way to get them the nutrients they need to power through the school day. Unfortunately, lunch boxes are often filled with packaged 'convenience' foods like full-calorie soda, chips, and cookies. This can add up to a lot of excess fat, sugar, sodium and calories that may contribute to long-term health problems like high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity.ⁱ These extra calories may also make kids sluggish or cranky in the afternoons.

When deciding what to put in your child's lunch box, it's a good idea to include foods from different groups. Focusing on variety not only makes lunches more interesting, but also helps your children enjoy a balanced lunch that will provide the energy and nutrients they need to grow, play, learn and stay healthy.

The basics for a healthy lunch box:

Try to include:

1. One serving of vegetables or salad and one serving of fruit (fresh, canned or dried can all count).
2. One serving of a low-fat or fat-free milk or dairy item such as a low-fat cheese stick, a yogurt cup, or some cottage cheese.
3. One serving of meat, chicken, fish, eggs, peanut butter, beans or another protein source.
4. A healthy drink such as water or 100% juice.

Easy, quick ways to pack a balanced healthy lunch with punch!:

Healthy Sandwiches

- Swap the white bread for whole wheat varieties for added boosts of fiber. Whole wheat bread can also be more filling.
- If your kids are bored with the traditional sandwich, try whole wheat pita or flatbread/tortilla wraps that you can quickly turn into sandwich swirls.
- Switch from bologna, salami, pastrami or corned beef, and other fatty luncheon meats to low-fat alternatives such as lean turkey or chicken breast.
- Sneak veggies like lettuce, cucumbers, or shredded cabbage in between slices of lean turkey or ham on a sandwich or in a wrap.
- Use peanut butter in moderation: 2 tablespoons (about the size of a ping pong ball) provides about 190 calories and 16 grams of fatⁱⁱ.
- Try using a thinner layer of peanut butter and substituting jelly with banana or thin apple slices for a healthier spin on an old favorite.
- Skip high-fat mayonnaise. Consider a small serving of reduced fat mayonnaise or skip it entirely and try using something with more flavor and fewer calories like mustard instead.

Pack a Salad

- Make it colorful: start with a base of dark greens then load up on bright veggies such as pepper, cucumbers, tomatoes and carrots.
- A salad can be more than just a side item. To make it the main entrée, include a lean protein like hard boiled eggs, beans or grilled chicken.
- Pack low-fat or fat-free dressing in a separate container to prevent the whole thing from getting mushy. Kids can drizzle it right on the salad before eating.
- If you're not a fan of washing, chopping, and preparing salad, consider making it easier by buying bags of lettuce or precut carrots or make extra salad for dinner and just pack the leftovers for lunch the next day.

Easy Entrées

- Make a cold pasta salad made from whole wheat noodles leftover from the previous night's dinner—put in a portable container and voila!
- Mix plain brown rice with canned beans or shredded lean meat for a high dose of protein and fiber.
- Pack hummus with fresh veggies and whole wheat pita triangles or flatbreads for dipping.
- Include low-fat or fat-free cottage cheese with carrots, cherry tomatoes, fresh berries, or melon. This makes for a calcium-rich, high-protein lunch.

Healthy Drinks

- If you pack juice, make sure it's 100% juice. All fruit drinks are required to list the “% juice” on the label. Many juice drinks contain no more than 10% juice and are mixed with a lot of sugar.
- Water and low-fat milk are the best drinks for children. They can be frozen to help keep foods in the lunch box cool and will usually be defrosted for drinking by lunch time.

Energy Snacks

- Swap traditional fried chips for baked potato or corn chips.
- Pack salt-free, dry-roasted almonds, hazelnuts, or walnuts to provide kids with a dose of heart-healthy essential fatty acids—be sure to cap the serving at $\frac{1}{4}$ cup since nuts are high in calories.
- Try a lowfat or light yogurt in exchange for the full calorie varieties targeted at children. If you'd prefer to avoid artificial sweeteners, try packing fat-free plain yogurt mixed with fresh fruit.
- Select whole grain granola bars that are low in fat and sugar – take a look at the food label and choose the ones that contain less than 1g of saturated fat per serving and are no more than 35% sugar by weight. To figure the percentage of sugar per



serving, divide the grams of sugar by the gram weight of one serving and multiply this number by 100.

- Aim to make snack treats occasional rather than everyday items. A small serving of animal crackers are lower in fat and sugar than regular cookies, doughnuts, brownies and other baked goods.

Packing a quick lunch when there's no time

- Piece together things that don't need any preparation...a whole piece of fruit, a lowfat yogurt, individual packs of baby carrots, and sliced turkey wrapped in a tortilla is a great balanced lunch.
- Save time by packing leftover rice, beans, chicken, salad, and other healthy options into lunch containers at dinner time.
- If you're looking for pre-packaged lunches, aim for those with no more than a few hundred calories and the least amount of saturated fat, transfat, and sodium.

ⁱ <http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=1466>

ⁱⁱ USDA Nutrient Data Library: http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/cgi-bin/list_nut_edit.pl.