

Send Your Kids To School With Healthy Lunches They Will Eat

By Helen Flengeris

Lunchtime is often a child's favourite time of the school day. Parents on the other hand, often find filling the lunch bag a challenging chore. With the hectic lifestyles many families are leading, convenience foods are becoming more common place in kids' lunches. Often these pre-packaged lunches are high in fat and salt and low in nutrition. With a little knowledge, some time and a bit of imagination, your children will look forward to nutritious home-packed lunches.

One of the best strategies to make sure that your children will eat their lunch is to involve them in the planning, shopping and preparation. Avoid the daily panic of "what do I pack today?" by planning the week lunch menu on the weekend with your children. This will also make grocery shopping more easy. Remember that kids do need some guidance and limitations when planning the lunches. Below are some ideas.

- Lunches should contain a food from each of the four food groups of Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating – Grain Products, Vegetables and Fruit, Milk Products and Meat and Alternatives. Have kids make a list of foods they like to eat from each of the four food groups. Be specific, for example, list all the different vegetables and fruit they like such as zucchini, to-

matoes, onions, carrots, pears, dried apricots. You and your children may be surprised with how many nutritious foods they like to eat. Post this list on the fridge.

- Take children to the grocery store once in a while and have them choose vegetables, fruits, breads, meats and milk products they would like to try. Keep this shopping trip limited to the four walls of the grocery store. This is usually where you will find these more basic nutritious foods. You will find the more processed, convenience foods in the middle aisles.
 - Have children help in the preparation. They can wash fruits and vegetables, shred cheese, mix simple salad dressings and dips and put a sandwich together.
 - Tell children to bring home what they have not eaten. That way you know what your child is and is not eating and this will help planning in the future.
- Set limits about how often they can take convenience meals such as Pizza Pockets™ and Lunchables™. When they do take these items, make sure the lunch is balanced by adding food groups missing in the convenience meal.
- Pack lunches the night before to avoid last minute scrambling.



- Designate a shelf or drawer to store packing items such as baggies, re-useable plastic containers and left over condiments from take-out restaurants for quick packing.

Variety is the key to interesting lunches every day. Here are some suggestions for you and your child to consider when planning and packing lunches.

- Fruit and granola mixed into plain yogurt is a healthy dessert. Put it together in a re-useable plastic container.
- A pasta salad can include foods from all four food groups. Mix cooked pasta with your child's favourite vegetables. Add shredded cheese, ham pieces and salad dressing.
- Pumpernickel, rye, raisin and French bread make the same old sandwich more interesting. Wraps, pita pockets and bagels are popular these days.
- There are many types of sandwich fillings to choose from. Try roasted chicken or pork slices, tuna salad, meat loaf slices or hummus (chickpea spread). Flavoured mustards, vegetables and spices make the sandwich even tastier.
- Alternatives to meat could include a bean salad, lentil soup or egg salad.
- Box drinks of 100% fruit juice or low fat milk are convenient and healthy. If you freeze the juice box the night before, it will keep the lunch cool and be either defrosted or "Slurpee-like" by lunchtime. A thermos is more economical and environmentally friendly than drinking boxes.
- As well as fresh fruit and vegetables, fruit canned in juice (without added sugar), dried fruit and vegetable juice

are handy for school lunches.

- There are a variety of types of cheese and flavoured yogurts. Milk pudding is also a good choice occasionally. If packing chocolate milk, mix it half-and-half with white milk to make it less sweet.
- Homemade baking can be more nutritious than store-bought. You can reduce the amount of sugar by one-half to one-third and substitute one-third to one-half the white flour with whole-wheat flour. Also add ingredients like skim milk powder, wheat germ, dried fruit, grated vegetables, molasses, oatmeal and chopped nuts and seeds.
- Pizza bagels are a healthy alternative to Pizza Pockets and take only minutes to make. Slice a bagel in half. Add some pizza sauce, shredded cheese, low fat deli meat and vegetables. Broil the pizza bagel until the cheese is brown and bubbly. It can then be re-heated at school or eaten cold.

There are many benefits to packing a healthy lunch. Not only can you save money by making a healthy lunch at home, but your child will learn better and have overall better health.

If you would like additional information, contact a RQHR Public Health Nutritionist at 766-7777.

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