
Lunch boxes - healthy ideas

Summary

- There are many healthy foods that are great for school lunches.
 - Encourage your child to be involved in their own lunch preparation, and discuss choices with them.
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Fruit

Include at least one serve of fruit in your child's lunch box each day. Use fresh seasonal fruit whenever possible. Canned fruit in natural juice (with no added sugar) is also a good alternative. Dried fruit is high in sugar and can stick to teeth, resulting in dental health problems. It is best to include dried fruit only occasionally.

Some ideas for including fruit in your child's lunch box include:

- apple, either whole or cut into quarters – try royal gala, granny smith, delicious, Jonathan, pink lady or golden delicious varieties
- banana
- mandarin
- orange cut into quarters (can be sent to school frozen)
- passionfruit cut in half with a spoon
- cubes of watermelon, honeydew or rockmelon
- chunks of pineapple
- mango cheeks or slices
- bunch of grapes – white or black
- plum
- nectarine – white or yellow
- peach – white or yellow
- apricot
- small container of berries – try a mixture – strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, raspberries
- cherries
- kiwi fruit with a spoon
- pear – nashi, brown, packham or Josephine varieties
- lychees.

Vegetables

Remember to include vegetables in your child's lunch box every day. Encourage children to enjoy the crunch and colour of raw vegetables. Try salad or grilled vegetables such as capsicum or eggplant in your rolls or sandwiches. Try vegetable sticks with dips, or a container of mixed raw vegetables.

Try including:

- whole small carrots or cut up carrot sticks
 - strips of yellow, red or green capsicum
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- cherry tomatoes
- Roma tomatoes
- whole green beans
- a handful of snow peas
- small Lebanese cucumbers or cut up cucumber sticks
- celery sticks
- mushrooms
- peas in the pod
- corn on the cob or a small container of canned corn (no added salt)
- grilled or roasted vegetables
- grated carrot, zucchini or beetroot in bread rolls.

Some ideas to make lunch box vegies fun and interesting for kids include:

- Ants on a log – fill celery sticks with low-fat cream cheese or hummus, and place sultanas across the top.
- Sticks ‘n’ dip combo – offer crunchy veggie sticks like carrot, green beans, capsicum, celery and cucumber with a small container of beetroot dip or tomato salsa.
- Corny cobs – steam corn on the cob and put in the lunchbox. Alternatively, use a small container of canned corn (no added salt).
- Roast vegetable, chickpea and couscous salad – fill a small tub (with a tight fitting lid) with salad and top with a dollop of hummus or natural yoghurt.
- Falafel wraps – make a delicious lunch wrap with baked falafel, tomato, lettuce, cucumber and dip (for example, tzatziki, yoghurt or hummus).
- Grilled or oven-baked vegetable chunks or wedges – serve with yoghurt dip.
- Vegie muffins – try pumpkin and zucchini, carrot and sultana, cheese and corn, pumpkin and date and sweet potato, zucchini and poppy seed. Visit the Better Health Channel recipe page for more ideas.
- Vegie slice – mix grated vegetables (such as zucchini) with chopped onion, cheese, flour and eggs and bake in a moderate oven until golden brown.
- Snap pack – fill a snaplock bag with sugar snap peas and cherry or Roma tomatoes

Dairy – milk, yoghurt, cheese and alternatives, mostly reduced fat

Children need dairy foods like milk, yoghurt and cheese for optimal growth and development. It is important to put some dairy options in children’s lunch boxes every day. If your child cannot tolerate dairy foods, use suitable alternatives like calcium-fortified soy or rice drink, or soy yoghurt. One serve of dairy food is 250 ml of milk, 200 g of yoghurt (one small tub) or 40 g of cheese (two slices).

Some top tips for packing dairy in the lunch box include:

- cheese slices, cubes or sticks
- yoghurt – natural or fruit yoghurt. Try freezing a tub of yoghurt and putting it in your lunch box. By lunchtime, it will have partially thawed and be ready to eat. Remember to include a spoon.
- milk – either cow’s milk or calcium-enriched legume/bean/cereal milk products. In the summer, try freezing milk overnight and wrap in a cloth for the lunch box to minimize the sweating. By lunchtime, it will be ready to drink.

Protein – meat or meat alternatives

Each day, the lunchbox should include a food that is high in protein, such as some lean meat or poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, legumes/beans, or nuts and seeds. If your school has a nut-free policy, peanut butter and other nuts should not be included in your child’s lunchbox.

Some foods to choose from as a starter for your sandwich or a snack include:

- tuna or salmon in spring water – for variety, try small cans of flavoured fish such as sun-dried tomato, and basil and lemon pepper
- sliced nut loaf, or tuna and olive loaf
- hard boiled eggs, curried eggs or mashed egg dip in a sandwich. For a fun treat, try ‘googy faces’ – shell hard-boiled eggs, wrap in cling wrap and draw smiley faces on the cling wrap with a marker
- falafel balls and lentil patties are an easy, handy snack and can be used in pita bread and flatbread rolls
- hummus or other bean dip
- smoked salmon or trout, or sliced cold lean meats such as ham, turkey, chicken, silverside, roast beef or lamb, cold sliced meatloaf or meatballs. These can be added to sandwiches or used as a snack
- baked beans, bean mixes (choose low salt where available) and bean salad
- fish cakes, tuna patties or salmon patties make a delicious and filling snack for afternoon tea
- peanut butter with no added salt or sugar, and plain unsalted nuts (30 g). If your school has a nut-free policy, peanut butter and other nuts should not be included in your child’s lunch box.
- muffins with lean meat such as ham and zucchini

If you’ve made a dish with meat or meat alternatives for dinner the night before (like a beef casserole, lentil dhal or vegetable frittata), keep the leftovers in the fridge and use some for kids’ lunch boxes the next day.

Grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain and high-fibre varieties

Remember to include lots of varieties of bread, fillings and spreads, to retain interest in sandwiches.

Try using:

- breads or rolls (wholemeal, multigrain, rye, sourdough, pumpernickel, pita, flat, corn, mountain, lavash, white fibre-enriched, soy and linseed, herb)
- mountain/lavash breads – try wheat, corn, rice or barley
- pita/Lebanese breads
- foccacia/Turkish breads
- bagels
- fruit loaf or buns.

Other grain-based meals can also be excellent choices for school lunches, such as:

- rice or pasta salads (for example, rice salad with salmon, snow peas and asparagus, or tuna pasta salad with yoghurt poppy seed dressing)
- rice dishes, such as rice paper rolls, fried rice (with pork, chicken or seafood), vegetarian fried rice with egg (add tofu for some extra protein) or brown rice and vegetable bake
- pasta and noodle dishes.

Grains can also make simple, convenient and tasty snacks. Try:

- scones, pikelets, crumpets and English muffins (choose wholemeal where available)
- crackers, crispbreads, rice cakes and corn thins (choose wholemeal or wholegrain where available).

Lunch box drinks

Water is the best drink for children and should be packed with the school lunch box every day. A drink bottle filled with water that children can refill throughout the day is an excellent way to keep kids hydrated. On a warm day, frozen water bottles can help keep lunches chilled and also provide a refreshing drink.

Plain milk is another great drink option for school lunches, and reduced-fat options are suitable for school-aged children. UHT milk is a handy, practical choice, because it does not need to be kept cold.

Sugar-sweetened drinks are not suitable for children’s lunch boxes and these should be avoided. These include

sugar-sweetened soft drinks and cordials, fruit drinks, vitamin waters, flavoured waters, mineral waters and ice teas, energy drinks and sports drinks.

Artificially sweetened drinks do not add any sugar or energy (kilojoules) to the diet. However, they teach kids the 'habit' of drinking sweet drinks and can result in a preference for sweet drink choices. Some artificially sweetened drinks like diet soft drinks are also acidic and can result in dental health problems. Artificially sweetened drinks are not appropriate for children.

Flavoured milks and fruit juices also add sugar to children's diets and should only be provided sometimes.

Lunch box recipes

Many supermarkets have products that seem conveniently packed and are marketed for school lunches, but biscuits, fruit straps, chips and other products can be high in sugar, salt and fat. Another option is to make your own snacks.

Some of our favourite lunch box recipes include:

- **[Better Health Channel's lunch box recipes.](#)**
- **[Healthy Eating Advisory Service.](#)**
- **[Nutrition Australia.](#)**

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