
Healthy eating – school lunches

Summary

School is a time when children start to make independent choices about their lifestyles. School aged children learn quickly and are influenced by friends and popular trends. This is an important time to talk about and encourage healthy food habits.

Involving children in planning and preparing their own lunchboxes gives them the opportunity to learn about healthy eating, and also gives them a chance to make autonomous decisions about what they will be eating during the day.

Involve your children in healthy choices

Some tips to help get your kids involved include:

- Talk to your children about what they would like to have in their lunchbox. Discuss healthier food and drink choices and decide what will be in the lunchbox together.
- Write a shopping list together. Take your children shopping with you and let them choose foods and drinks from the shopping list.
- Encourage your children help prepare their lunchboxes. Older children may be able to prepare most of their lunch themselves, and younger children can help with making sandwiches or cutting up soft fruit. It is a good idea to prepare lunchboxes the evening before to allow children to participate.

What to put in healthier school lunches

Try planning a healthy lunch box to start the school year. Talk to your children and discuss what they would be happy to have included.

The six key parts to a healthy lunchbox include:

- fresh fruit
- fresh crunchy vegetables
- milk, yoghurt or cheese (you can use reduced-fat options for children over the age of two years). For children who cannot tolerate milk products, offer appropriate alternatives like calcium fortified soy or rice drink or soy yoghurt
- a meat or meat alternative food like some lean meat (e.g. chicken strips), hard-boiled egg or peanut butter. If your school has a nut-free policy, peanut butter and other nuts should not be included in your child's lunchbox
- a grain or cereal food like bread, a roll, flat bread, fruit bread or crackers (wholegrain or wholemeal choices are best)
- tap water.





(Images © Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation 2013)

Tips for healthy lunchboxes include:

- Cut up large pieces of fruit and put them in a container – this makes it easier to eat, especially if your child has wobbly teeth or if they have less time to eat than they are used to. Send a damp face washer to help with extra juicy fruit.
- Consider giving half a sandwich or roll for morning recess, as this is an easy way to get a healthy fill.
- In the hot weather, send frozen milk, yoghurt or water, or even frozen orange segments. This makes a great refreshing snack and helps to keep the lunch box cool.
- Go for colour and crunch in the lunch box by offering a variety of colourful vegetables and fruit.

There are many websites where you can find ideas for a healthy and interesting school lunch.

What not to put in healthier school lunches

Some items do not belong in a healthy school lunchbox. Six items to avoid when preparing lunch for your children include:

- all sweet drinks such as fruit juices, fruit drinks, cordials, sports drinks, energy drinks, flavoured waters, flavoured mineral waters, iced teas and soft drinks. These are high in energy (kilojoules) and sugar, and can lead to weight gain and oral health problems in children
- dried fruit bars and 'straps'. These are low in fibre and are also high in sugar and can stick to children's teeth, causing tooth decay
- 'dairy desserts', chocolate bars and muesli bars. These are generally high in fat and sugar
- chocolate spreads, jams and honey in sandwiches. These add extra, unnecessary sugar to the lunchbox
- fatty, salty processed meats such as salami and Strasburg
- 'oven-baked' savoury biscuits. These may sound like healthier options, but some are just as high in salt and fat as crisps.

Artificially sweetened drinks

Artificially sweetened drinks do not add extra kilojoules (energy) or sugar to the lunchbox, but still encourage sweet preference and promote the habit of drinking sweet drinks in children. Artificially sweetened soft drinks are also acidic and can lead to tooth decay. Artificially sweetened drinks should not be included in the lunchbox.

School lunches and food safety

Food is usually stored in lunchboxes for several hours and it is important to keep the lunchbox cool so that the food stays fresh. Some tips to help keep lunchboxes safe include:

- Choose an insulated lunch box or one with a freezer pack.
- Pack a wrapped frozen water bottle or freezer brick next to foods that should be kept cold (for example cheeses, yoghurts, meats and salads).
- Perishable foods such as dairy products, eggs and sliced meats should be kept cool, and eaten within about four hours of preparation. Don't pack these foods if just cooked. First cool in the refrigerator overnight.
- If making lunches ahead of time, keep them in the fridge until leaving for school or freeze them in advance.
- If you include leftover meals such as meats, pasta and rice dishes, make sure you pack a frozen ice block in the lunch box.
- Ask children to keep packed lunches in their school bag and to keep their bag out of direct sunlight and away from heat, ideally in a cool, dark place such as a locker.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Department of Health and Human Services - MHW&A - Prevention and Population Health - Food and Nutrition

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2019 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.