

Healthy School Lunches

School-aged children eat an important meal at school each day: lunch. In the past, concerns were raised about the quality of school-provided lunches. Because of these concerns and the increased problem of obesity in schoolchildren, school-lunch standards were put into place in schools in 2012 to ensure that school-provided foods are healthy.

These criteria established minimum and maximum amounts of calories; eliminated high-fat milk options, such as chocolate milk; and reduced the sodium content of foods in a school-provided lunch. These changes help ensure that children who eat a lunch provided by their school have healthy and balanced options.

More recently, concerns have been raised about making sure that the lunches that students bring from home are also healthy and of good quality. A research study in this month's *JAMA Pediatrics* investigated school lunches brought from home and found that, on average, homemade lunches had higher than recommended calories, more sodium, and fewer fruits and vegetables compared with school-lunch standards. Most students had high-calorie foods, such as sweetened beverages, snack chips, and desserts, in their lunches brought from home. Other studies have also shown that lunches brought from home may be much more expensive than lunches provided at school.

Today's busy parents may find it challenging to plan and pack lunches for their children to bring to school. The US Department of Agriculture supports the MyPlate framework in planning meals. This framework suggests that approximately one-half of a meal be made up of fruits and vegetables, with 25% of the meal as whole grains and 25% as a protein source. There are several key factors to keep in mind in planning and packing lunches.

The current US recommendations for total lunch calories are as follows: 550 to 650 calories for children 5 to 10 years of age, 600 to 700 calories for children 11 to 13 years of age, and 750 to 850 calories for children 14 to 18 years of age.

There are many options to include in lunches, including whole or sliced fresh fruits and vegetables, dried fruits, applesauce, and veggies with dip. Try to pack at least 1 fresh fruit or vegetable each day in your child's lunch.

Children can purchase both low-fat milk (1%) or fat-free milk at school. If you send your child to school with a dairy beverage, be sure it is one of these low-fat varieties. For children who cannot drink milk, many schools offer milk substitutes, such as calcium-fortified soy beverages.

Water is a great option as a lunch beverage. Schools provide water where meals are served, and many schools allow children to bring



their own favorite water bottle. Avoid sugar-sweetened beverages, such as soda or juice, because these foods have limited or no nutritional value and add extra calories. Healthy grain options include whole-grain pasta, brown rice, whole-grain bread, or oatmeal.

There are many protein options to consider when packing a lunch. Some options to consider that provide less salt and fat compared with many protein sources include lean meats or poultry, beans and peas, nuts or tofu, and seafood.

Avoid packing chips or prepackaged snacks in school lunches because these foods are typically higher in fat, calories, and salt and provide little nutritional value to help fuel your child's activity during the school day. Avoid prepackaged lunches that have limited nutritional value and typically include desserts and juice. These types of lunches are also much more expensive than making your own lunch.

A great way to build consistent healthy lunches that your child will love is to involve him or her in the processes of shopping for lunch foods and picking out healthy options! This practice can help lead to healthy eating habits that will last for years to come.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/food-groups/downloads/TenTips/DGTipsheet21SchoolDayJustGotHealthier.pdf>

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