

Healthy School Lunches

Packing your kid a healthy school lunch is one way to help him get some of the daily nutrients he needs to be healthy. According to the United States Department of Agriculture's "MyPyramid for Kids," your child should be eating meals that include whole grains, various vegetables, fruits, lean proteins, oils, and calcium-rich foods each day.

Top 3 Healthy School Lunches Under \$3, from Registered Dietitian Diane Henderiks

- Natural peanut butter & banana sandwich on 100% whole wheat bread, carrot sticks, 1% milk, and fresh strawberries. Total: \$1.27
- Breakdown:
 - Peanut butter - \$.15
 - Banana - \$.23
 - 2 slices whole wheat - \$.32
 - Carrot sticks - \$.10
 - 1% milk - \$.27
 - Fresh strawberries - \$.20
- Turkey, spinach, & low-fat cheese wrap, cucumber slices w/ ranch dip, grapes, and a bottle of water. Total: \$2.34
- Breakdown:
 - Turkey breast - \$.37
 - Low-fat cheese - \$.50
 - Spinach - \$.08
 - Mayo - \$.05
 - Whole wheat wrap - \$.38
 - Cucumber slices - \$.16
 - Ranch dip - \$.10
 - Grapes - \$.50
 - Bottle of water - \$.20
- Bento box/buffet: hard-boiled egg, cheese stick, 5 multigrain crackers, trail mix, broccoli w/ ranch dip, natural applesauce, and a bottle of water. Total: \$1.65
- Breakdown:
 - Egg - \$.16
 - Cheese stick - \$.38
 - Crackers - \$.25
 - Trail mix - \$.18
 - Broccoli - \$.28
 - Ranch dip - \$.10
 - Applesauce - \$.10

- Bottle of water - \$.20

Select foods and beverages for your children that do not list sugar and caloric sweeteners as one of the first ingredients. Added sugars often contribute calories but minimal nutrients, according to the USDA.

What Moms Can Do about Healthy School Lunches

Celeb chef and mom Susannah Locketti shares her expertise on the top bagged lunch must-haves for kids:

Packing a lunch for your little one is a healthy must. I refuse to let my kiddos dine on chicken nuggets, fries, and hamburgers at school. They feel sluggish after meals like this. Yet, when I pack them some healthy staples, their teachers report they are alert and energetic. Luckily, packing a healthy lunch is a cinch if you remember to include these five staples.

Fresh Fruit & Veggies: When I asked my seven-year-old what would be the yummiest healthy stuff in a lunch, his top three answers were kiwi, grapes, and pineapple. Fresh fruit is a must in school lunches. Cutting up fruit is also a great way to get your kids to eat their fruit. On Sunday night, chop up a bowl of fruit salad and spoon it into individual half-cup reusable containers. Add chopped grapes or apples to chicken or tuna salad, or make fruit kabobs with low-fat cheddar cheese squares. Portable fruits with an outer layer such as oranges, bananas, apples, and grapes are convenient and tasty. Chopped fresh veggies with a small container of salad dressing is my son's favorite. Cut up carrot sticks, celery, cucumbers, or peppers to keep it varied. The more convenient you make the vegetables, the more you increase your chances of the kids eating them up!

Whole Grains: Whole wheat or whole grain bread with at least three grams of fiber per slice is a must. The fiber will keep your child full and satisfied. Swap out pretzels for air-popped popcorn with sea salt or whole grain pita chips. I even like to include a small baggie of a whole-grain cereal as a crunchy snack for my boys. Be sure the cereal also has at least three grams of fiber per serving. My eleven-year-old son asks for whole-grain organic granola bars. Again, look for one with a high fiber content. Shopping for these can be tough, so ask your kids to pick the box they think looks best once you've narrowed down the healthiest type.

Protein: Busy parents should make use of lean meats found at the deli. Lean roast beef, turkey, chicken, and ham are delicious meats to include to keep the kids interested in lunch. Switch it up and ask for extra-thick slices to create chunks and thread it on toothpicks with some cheese. Or, roll up thin slices and seal with a toothpick and olive for some fun munching. Peanut butter is also great protein to stick in a small reusable container as a dip for apples or celery. Just be sure to check if anyone in class has a peanut butter allergy.

Dairy: This one is a no-brainer. Freeze yogurts overnight and pop them in your child's morning lunch box. By the time lunch rolls around, your kids will be psyched to have a slushy healthy dessert that is good for them too. Go for organic yogurt or organic yogurt tubes. Another great tip -- don't be afraid to pack low-fat milk in a thermos. Thermoses may seem old-fashioned, but they are making a comeback and have less post-consumer waste than milk boxes. Cheese is also excellent to include under this category. Change the way you offer it to them by making shapes out of it using cookie cutters. Save the scraps for an egg and cheese omelet during the week.

Beverages: I gave up juice boxes over five years ago and my kids barely miss them. Instead, I pack them water in a reusable container -- end of story. There is no reason to load a kid up with sugar from juice, soda, or vitamin waters. Kids nowadays are even drinking energy drinks. My feeling is that fruit is meant to be eaten, not sipped. Milk is also a second beverage option, but water should still make it into your child's lunch for hydrating throughout the day. If you are a die-hard juice packer, water it down by half before packing it in your child's lunch. Also, always choose 100% fruit juice and aim for organic options when you can.

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