

Healthy School Lunches

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Packing a school lunch that your child enjoys and that meets his nutritional requirements is easy. All it takes is a little planning, some imagination, and some feedback from your child.

Planning is key. The first step in planning any school lunch is to ask the child what he likes. By offering your child a variety of lunch foods, he can help decide what to pack. When he is in on the decision making end, he will almost always be open to trying new nutritious and healthy foods. Children tend to eat healthier if they help choose and prepare the meal. In order to make planning go smoothly; decide on your menu ahead of time. Start by making sure you have the necessary ingredients on hand. This will prevent you from making a last minute decision, which might involve an unhealthy choice. Planning ahead also helps make shopping quicker and easier. Once you choose your menu, make a shopping list of the things you do not have on hand. Sticking to shopping list saves time and money.

Federal surveys show that children get about one-third of their daily calories at lunch. Make those calories count. Always refer to My Pyramid, put out by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for nutrition recommendations for children ages 3 and older. The percentage of obese children has nearly doubled in the past 2 years, and childhood obesity may be a risk factor for heart, circulatory and other health problems in adulthood. Your healthy choices can reduce this risk. Consider the following ideas from Kids Health: Pita pockets, English muffins, raisin bread, or flour tortillas are healthy bases for a nutritious lunch. You can vary the type of bread you use each day to make it interesting and appealing. Cut the bread into a fun shape with cookie cutters, such as a star or a triangle, for a change of pace. Pasta salad is another option. Use fun-shaped and colored pasta, such as small shells, wagon wheels, or ABCs. Chicken, tuna, or egg salad is packed with protein. Serve it in pita bread or in a small cup or container. Luncheon meats, such as lean cuts of ham, roast beef, or turkey are favorites with kids. Have the deli give you thick slices instead of thin ones, and then cut them into animal images with a cookie cutter. How about a thick slice of turkey cut into the shape of a turkey? Or a slice of ham resembling a pig? You and your child can experiment with making these deli animals the night before. Make old standbys with a new twist. A plain peanut butter and jelly sandwich will excite kids when it's jazzed up with raisins and granola. Raw vegetables can be appealing when served in the right manner. For example, serve celery sticks cut into small pieces and filled with peanut butter. And finally, you can also use "filler" vegetables - lettuce, onions, tomatoes, and peppers – in sandwiches to help your kids get the necessary amount of vegetable servings every day.

Another important factor to consider is food safety. To protect your child from food-borne bacteria, make sure lunches are kept at safe temperatures. Keep foods fresh by keeping cold foods cold and hot foods hot. Choose an insulated lunch bag or sack to make sure foods stay at proper temperatures. Refreeze-able ice packs will keep cold foods cold and a well-insulated thermos will keep hot foods hot. In addition, make sure all lunch containers are washed with warm soapy water each day.

If you have any questions call Robin Peters at the Whole Village 536-3720 ext 103, or the UNH Cooperative Extension office at 787-6944.