

Healthy School Lunch Ideas

Quick-Reference Lunch Ideas

Here's a list of healthy lunch foods. Mix and match to see what combinations you can come up with. Share the list with your children and ask them to choose which foods they'd like to take to school. Reduce your work load by encouraging older children to pack their own school lunches. Make sure you have plenty of choices on hand for them to choose from each day.

Breads	Spreads & Condiments	Fillings	Fruits (Dried and Fresh)	
bagel baguette bread sticks crackers English muffin focaccia lavash bread pita bread pizza bread rice cakes rolls sandwich bread tortillas	almond butter apple butter avocado (mashed) banana (mashed) brie cheese cashew butter cream cheese (lowfat) goat cheese honey hummus jam (spreadable fruit) ketchup mayonnaise/mustard peanut butter pesto pizza or tomato sauce pumpkin butter	carrots (shredded) cheese (lite/low-fat) chicken chicken salad egg salad hard boiled egg nitrite-free hot dogs lettuce shrimp salad sliced avocado sliced cucumber smoked salmon sprouts tofu tuna salad	apples apricots Asian pears avocado bananas blueberries cherries cranberries (dried) dates figs mango papaya pears prunes raisins	grapefruit grapes kiwi melon nectarines orange sections peaches pineapple plums raspberries strawberries tomatoes

Vegetables		Treats	Other	Other Grains
asparagus beets bell peppers bok choy broccoli Brussels sprouts cabbage carrots cauliflower celery cucumbers eggplant green beans green salad	lettuce mushrooms seaweed (nori, wakame, hijiki) shelling peas snap peas soy beans (edamame) spinach squash sweet potatoes yams zucchini	apple crisp applesauce baked chips with salsa dried fruit fruit bar fruit leather granola homemade cookies notes from home popcorn pretzels stickers trail mix vanilla yogurt with fruit	baked tofu bean burrito cottage cheese with fruit garlic toast polenta with pizza sauce and cheese	pasta rice couscous oatmeal bulghar

More Lunch Ideas

Red bell pepper strips - these are sweet, and your kids may find them a treat

Smoothies - you can make smoothies with healthy ingredients and put them in a thermos or drink bottle.

Roll-ups (natural – no corn syrup)

Fruit, vegetables or cheese kabobs - Cut up the food in chunks and skewer them on a stick. kids like the idea of kabobs

Colorful fruit salad

Homemade Muffins

Guacomole dip - made with mashed avocados - dip blue corn chips

Quesadillas - melted cheese on a whole-wheat tortilla - add veggies

Baked Beans - in a wide-mouthed thermos

Homemade Soups, Stews or Chili - in a wide-mouthed thermos

Make lunch fun - put in love notes, little toys, other special treats

Using Leftovers

Don't forget about leftovers! Packing leftovers in your child's lunch can save you time and energy, and kids love them. When you're deciding what to cook for dinner, think about how you might incorporate leftovers into a lunch for the following day. Make a few extra servings for dinner and set them aside for the next day's lunch. While you're doing the after dinner kitchen clean-up, place the lunches on the counter. As you're putting away the food, pack some of the extras in the lunches and refrigerate overnight. Here are a few ideas for making it work:

- If you make chicken breasts, prepare an extra serving and slice it for sandwiches the next day instead of purchasing deli lunch meat.
- If you're making a salad for dinner, slice some extra vegetables, such as cucumbers, carrots, bell peppers, and celery, or make an extra undressed salad directly in the Laptop Lunch. (Make extra dressing and pour it into the dip container.)
- While you're making dinner, boil a few eggs. Pack the eggs whole, make deviled eggs, or use them in egg salad.
- Make extra pasta, couscous, or rice and make side salads for lunch by cutting up vegetables and adding salad dressing.
- Grill extra vegetables and use them in sandwiches.
- Make an extra baked potato and pack it with nutritious toppings.

If you're worried that it might seem less appealing the following day, consider packing it for lunch two days later, provided the food will remain fresh for an extra day.

Sandwich fillings

Try some of these sandwich fillings in whole-wheat pocket bread, on whole-grain bread, bagels, crackers, English muffins, rice cakes or rolls, or try filling and rolling tortillas or lavash flat bread.

- Cheese, avocado, and sprouts
- Grilled cheese with cucumber or sprouts
- Leftover grilled vegetables (bell peppers, onions, mushrooms, eggplant, zucchini) with sliced cheese, goat cheese, or pesto sauce
- Cheddar or mozzarella cheese with apple slices
- Brie cheese with mustard and sprouts
- Cheese, tomato, sprouts or lettuce, and pesto sauce
- Leftover turkey loaf with tomatoes, and lettuce or sprouts
- Sliced leftover chicken or turkey, cranberry sauce, and lettuce
- Sliced leftover chicken or turkey, honey mustard, tomatoes, and lettuce or sprouts
- Sliced leftover beef with mayonnaise or horseradish, sliced tomato and cucumbers
- Chicken salad made with celery, lettuce, and tomato
- Tuna/cucumber/green pepper salad with tomato
- Salmon salad with lettuce or sprouts
- Shrimp salad with lettuce or sprouts
- Lowfat cream cheese, and smoked salmon (with tomato, and red onion)

Ideas for picky eaters

Do you have a picky eater in your family? Here are a few ideas for helping him or her transition to a healthier diet:

Prepare your child.

Talk with your child about nutrition and the importance of developing a healthy body. Together, come up with a family plan, including a list of steps the family wants to take to transition to a more healthful diet. Post the list in a place where everyone can see it.

Think Positively.

If your child sees you enjoying these changes, he/she will be more likely to join in.

Involve your child.

Children of all ages can help with menu planning, shopping, and preparing meals. Children who feel they have had a part preparing the meal will be more likely to eat it.

Introduce a wide variety of foods.

Offer a variety of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and legumes. Offer a few teaspoons of each at every dinner. Even if your child eats only two bites, he will understand that these are the foods that make up a healthy diet. When he starts wanting more than two bites, expand your offerings to include more foods. As your child grows, increase serving sizes.

Experiment with old favorites.

Offer a new food with a familiar one. Applaud adventurous eating.

Offer the same food prepared in different ways.

Offer foods alone and prepared in combination with other ingredients. Cut foods in different ways. Try carrot sticks one day and carrot coins another.

Don't Give Up.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, many children will not accept a new food until it has been offered at least ten times. Continue to offer new foods until your child considers them familiar.

Introduce foods one bite or several bites at a time.

Some children become overwhelmed by large quantities of food on their plate. Others will feel more successful if they can finish a small quantity of food you have provided, so keep portions small.

Serve vegetables and new foods as an appetizer.

If vegetables and new foods are served last or with other foods, children can easily fill themselves up and leave vegetables behind. Start dinner, for example, with two green beans and two carrots or a green salad as a starter. When everyone has finished theirs, serve the rest of the meal. Consider serving fruits with the meal or saving them for dessert.

Don't become a short-order cook.

Prepare only one meal for the entire family. At first your child may refuse to eat dinner. Remain calm, stand firm, and ignore tantrums. Your child will not die of hunger from skipping a meal, but will likely come to the next meal with a healthy appetite and a willingness to eat what is served. Allow each family member to plan one dinner a week. Doing so will ensure that everyone has at least one dinner to look forward to.

Give your child a choice.

Give your child some choices within the boundaries you establish. For example, instead of asking, "What do you want for lunch?" ask "Would you like a turkey sandwich, or a quesadilla?"

Do not completely forbid certain foods.

Forbidden foods can quickly become the foods of greatest desire. At school, for example, children are more likely to trade for foods that are not allowed at home. Allow your children to choose a special food from time to time and let them eat it guilt free. Teach your children the difference between everyday foods and occasional foods. In time, they will start making healthy choices on their own.

Encourage children to bring home their lunch leftovers.

Looking at leftover lunches is a great way to get information about your children's lunch preferences. Find out why certain foods have come back uneaten. Did your child not like it? Was she not hungry enough to eat everything in the lunchbox? Was there a birthday celebration at school that day? Did she share someone else's lunch instead? Maintain a dialogue without criticizing. Consider making a list of foods that your child likes to eat for lunch and update it regularly with input from your child. You may find that she prefers romaine lettuce to red leaf lettuce. By making this simple change, she might start eating salads more regularly. Providing a dip for carrot and celery sticks might make eating them more fun.

Use the Star Incentive Chart

If your child is resisting the change to a waste-free lunch program, try using the Star Incentive Program described in Appendix 2. Younger children may respond well to stickers, especially if they can help pick them out.

Use the HealthPoint System

If your child is resisting the change to a healthier diet, try using the HealthPoint System. Allow your child to take one point for each healthy food eaten, four points for each day without junk food, and four points for each day that they exercise. If your child has received a certain agreed-upon number of points by the end of the week, do something special together.

Avoid food rewards.

Neither dessert nor candy should be used as a punishment or enticement. Rather, you must establish and enforce rules for when and how many treats will be consumed.

Bored with lunch making? Try some of these great menu ideas

#1 Double Salad Wrap

Roll-up sandwich
Pasta salad
Fruit salad

#2 See and Cee

Tuna sandwich
A cucumber chain
Sliced melon

#3 Mexican Mango Madness

Bean and cheese burrito
Sliced mango
Green salad with dressing on the side

#4 Hearty-Breaky

Whole-wheat fruit pancakes
A hard-boiled or poached egg
100% maple syrup
Steamed yams

#5 Pocket Power

Almond butter and honey pocket sandwich
Steamed carrots & asparagus
Sliced apples

#6 Bagel Deluxe

Half bagel with cream cheese, smoked salmon, and a face made of raisin eyes, cashew nose, and an apple smile
Pan-fried potatoes & herbs
Applesauce

Sneaking Healthy Ingredients

Here are a few suggestions for sneaking healthy ingredients into family meals.

Add finely chopped vegetables and herbs to chicken, tuna, scrambled eggs, omelets, and salmon salad.

Add parsley and other herbs whenever you can.

Instead of discarding the water left over from steamed vegetables; use it to cook rice and other grains. After you have steamed your vegetables, pour the liquid into an airtight container and store it in the freezer. When you're ready to cook your grains, defrost and use.

Add sesame seeds, sunflower seeds, or flax seeds to vegetables, casseroles, pastas, and sandwiches.

Add nuts such as almonds, walnuts, pecans, pine nuts, and cashews to salads, relishes, pastas, and other foods. (Note: nuts can cause choking in children three years and younger. Use with caution.)

Add lettuce, cucumbers, shredded carrots, celery, or sprouts to sandwiches.

Add a teaspoon of flaxseed oil to salad dressings, yogurt, applesauce, and other foods to provide your child with the essential fatty acids necessary for healthy cell function and brain development.

Blend steamed vegetables in tomato sauce and pour over pasta.