

Lunch box tips

Healthy lunches and snacks are important for active children. It is important to offer healthy lunch box choices. Tips include fresh fruit, crunchy vegetables and a combination of protein, dairy and carbohydrate foods.

Eating healthy food helps children concentrate and learn. However, healthy eating changes are not always easy to make. Try to set a good example with your own lunches. Encourage children to help choose and prepare their own lunch. They might like to make a list of the foods they enjoy. Praise your child when they choose healthy foods for their lunch box.

There are limited times for children to eat during the day, especially at school. Children may prefer to play with friends instead of eating. Encourage your child to sit and eat before heading out to play, or talk to your school about making sure all children get a chance to eat enough before play starts.

Foods to put in a lunch box

Suggestions include:

- Fresh fruit
- Crunchy vegetables
- A meat or protein food such as slices of lean meat, hardboiled egg, peanut butter or nut paste*
- Dairy food such as a cheese stick or slice, grated cheese, milk or yoghurt
- Starchy food such as bread, a roll, pita or flat bread, fruit bread or crackers
- Water.

Food suggestions for lunchboxes

There are lots of food choices available for lunch boxes. However, it can sometimes be difficult to decide which foods are healthy choices. Suggestions include:

- **Fruit** – best choices include fresh or tinned fruit. Dried fruit is sticky and high in sugar, so have it occasionally. Best left out of the lunch box are dried fruit bars and 'straps', which are very high in sugar, low in fibre and stick to children's teeth causing tooth decay.
- **Vegetables** – try vegetable sticks with dip or a small container with mixed vegetables such as cherry tomatoes, carrot sticks, capsicum and cucumber. Chips and packets of crisps are best left for parties and special occasions.
- **Milk, yoghurt and custard** – include a small drink of milk (freeze overnight) wrapped in a cloth in the lunch box. Fruit yoghurts should be kept cool in an insulated lunch box. Best left out of the lunch box are 'dairy desserts' and flavoured milks, which are high in sugar.
- **Dips, cheese and biscuits** – pre-packaged or your own homemade versions of cheese and crackers are fine. Children enjoy mini packaged cheeses. Avoid sweet dips such as chocolate spreads. 'Oven-baked' savoury biscuits are just as high in salt and fat as chips and are best avoided.
- **Different breads add interest** – include a variety of bread, especially if children begin to lose interest in sandwiches. Try bread rolls, pita bread, flat bread, bagels, fruit loaf or buns, foccacias, scones, pikelets, muffins, crumpets, crispbreads, rice cakes or corn thins.
- **Vary the fillings** – fillings can include vegemite or other yeast extract, peanut butter, cheese (try different types), tuna, egg, sliced cold meats, baked beans, grated carrot and lettuce, chopped roast meat with pickles or chutney, and avocado. Dips like caviar (taramosalata), eggplant, chickpea (hommus), cucumber, yoghurt (tzatziki) or spinach also make good spreads. Avoid chocolate spreads, jams and honey, and fatty meats like salami and strasbourg.

- **Muffins and cakes** – try making your own muffins and cakes as a great way to include more fruit and vegetables. Examples include sultana, carrot, zucchini, banana or pumpkin. Donuts and creamy cakes are best offered at birthdays and special occasions instead of in lunch boxes.
- **Muesli and 'breakfast' bars** – almost all 'bars' are too high in sugar to include regularly, but cereal bars may be better for teeth than chewy sticky muesli bars. Try to avoid muesli bars and chocolate bars in lunch boxes. These are expensive and usually stuck together with fats and sugars.

Practical issues for busy families

Foods should be simple and easy to prepare, ready to eat and appetising after several hours storage in the lunch box. Foods such as sandwiches can be prepared the night before or on the weekend, frozen, then taken for each day's lunch box. Suitable foods to freeze include:

- Bread
- Cooked meat
- Cheese
- Peanut butter
- Baked beans
- Mashed eggs
- Yeast or vegetable spreads such as Vegemite.

Food safety in lunchboxes

In most cases, food is stored in lunch boxes for several hours, so the lunch box needs to stay cool. Food safety suggestions include:

- Choose an insulated lunch box or one with a freezer pack, or include a wrapped frozen water bottle to keep the lunch box cool.
- Follow hygienic food preparation methods. This is especially important when food will be stored in the lunch box for many hours before eating.
- Prepare lunches the night before and store in the fridge or freezer.
- 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.

Best drinks for lunchboxes

Water and milk are the best drinks for children. They can be frozen to help keep foods in the lunch box cool. Sweet drinks such as fruit juices, juice drinks, cordials, sports drinks, flavoured mineral waters, soft drinks and fizzy drinks are high in sugar and not necessary. These drinks can increase the risk of tooth decay, are filling and may take the place of healthier foods.

Find out why they're not eating their lunch

Many schoolchildren bring their lunch home with them at the end of the day, which can be frustrating. There may be a variety of reasons why your child does not eat all the food in their lunch box. The following suggestions may be helpful:

- **The lunch box style** – your child may have an issue with their lunch container. They might prefer a brown paper bag or want the latest fashion in lunch boxes to be like the other kids. It may be difficult for them to open.
- **Boredom** – try to pack a different lunch every day. For younger children, cut the sandwiches in different ways to add interest: for example triangles, squares or strips. You could even use one slice of white and one slice of brown to make a 'zebra' sandwich.
- **Too dry** – if they say the filling is too dry, try leaving a sandwich uncut. Some fillings like dips or peanut butter may stay fresher this way. If your child's appetite seems small, offer smaller servings. For example, half a sandwich might be more appropriate than a whole one.

- **Fiddly and sticky** – make sure the foods are manageable and easy to eat. Some children are put off by fiddly packaging or don't like getting sticky hands. Fruit can be made easier to eat. For example, remove orange peel or cut a kiwifruit in half and include a spoon in the lunch box.
- **Make other meals count** – if your child hardly eats anything from their lunch box despite your best efforts, try to at least ensure they have a nutritious breakfast and dinner. Trust that your child will eat when hungry.

School canteens

Some schools have a canteen (tuckshop), while others may use a local shop or milk bar to provide lunches for children. The individual school needs to decide what types of foods are made available to children. If less healthy foods are available, it is best to choose these foods only occasionally.

The National Healthy School Canteens Guidelines (NHSCG) developed by the Federal Department of Health and Ageing are not mandatory for Victorian government schools and agencies working with school food service providers, although canteen managers may wish to use NHSCG complementary resources (such as recipes) to provide and promote healthier food choices. For public schools in Victoria, the School Canteens and Other School Food Services Policy has been mandatory since 2007 and includes a ban on high-sugar drinks and confectionery. This policy was also endorsed by the Catholic Education Office and accepted as a suitable guide for Catholic independent schools. All schools should provide healthy food choices and promote key health food messages to students to align with the policy.

Peer pressure

Food advertising and their friends' food choices will influence children. Remember that not all children go to school with lunch boxes filled with chips and lollies, despite what your children think and say. It is important to keep offering healthy lunch box choices in a variety of ways, as children learn to eat what is familiar to them. Remember that it may take time to change your child's food preferences to more healthy choices.

Severe food allergy

If your child has a severe food allergy, it is important to develop a management plan with your family doctor, the school, teacher and class. The school or early childhood setting will notify other parents or carers if certain food or drinks need to be kept away from children and limited in the lunch box. Some schools have a nut-free policy and fillings like peanut butter are not allowed.

Where to get help

- Your school nurse
- Community health nurse
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942

Things to remember

- It is important to keep offering healthy lunch box choices in a variety of ways, as children learn to eat what is familiar to them.
- Encourage your child to sit and eat before heading out to play, or talk to your school about making sure all children get a chance to eat enough before play starts.
- Include fruit and vegetables in your child's lunch box.
- Foods such as sandwiches can be prepared the night before or on the weekend, frozen, then taken for each day's lunch box.

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

Royal Children's Hospital - Nutrition Department

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

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

Copyright © 1999/2015 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.