



BACK TO SCHOOL

Lunch Ideas

by Sarah Muntel, RD

Summer has come to an end... bring on school, Fall and fun! It takes a while to get into the fall mindset of homework, schedules and school activities, but once you do, it's a snap! With the thought of back-to-school, many parents struggle with packing lunches every day for their kids. With a little creativity, planning and commitment, you can knock school lunch out of the park!

Let's dust off the old lunch boxes and get creative!

First, it's important to know that a balanced school lunch can set your kids up for success. Multiple studies show that when kids eat a healthy lunch, they will be able to focus and have the energy to get through the day. Some studies even show improved test scores. Additionally, with the rise in childhood obesity rates, a healthy lunch has a big impact on a child's long-term health. Who wouldn't want to take steps to make their kids more successful?

First, Let's Look at the Basics.

Make sure your lunch has this: Protein/Fruits/Vegetables/Dairy/Whole Grains. That seems like a lot for a kid, but offering all of the food groups can provide maximum nutrition. How about this?

- Ham and cheese on a whole wheat tortilla
- Yogurt, apple slices and carrot sticks
- A small cookie (because who's perfect!)

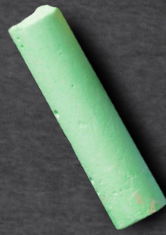
These options can provide a great lunch and offer protein, complex carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals and fiber. Looking for more ideas? Check these out:

- Peanut butter and banana sandwich on whole wheat bread
- Green peppers and low-fat dip
- String cheese
- Strawberries

There are so many choices for a tasty lunch!



Additional Tips for Creating Power-packed Lunches



LIMIT SUGAR:

Sure, a treat can be fine once in a while. There is nothing wrong with a cookie in your lunch box sometimes, but watch for hidden sugars elsewhere. There are many added sugars in drinks, yogurt tubes, apple sauces and fruit snacks. Read the nutrition labels on food packages and limit added sugars!

PLAN AHEAD:

There is nothing worse than throwing a lunch together two minutes before the bus pulls up. Spend some prep time to get set for the week by chopping and bagging vegetables, slicing fruit in containers and portioning out whole grain crackers. If you prep on Sunday, you can grab and go all week. This can also lead to a less stressful morning! Another option is to pack the entire lunch the night before and put it in the fridge for later. This way, you can completely avoid the morning rush.

GET THE RIGHT TOOLS:

Remember the days of brown paper bag lunches? Things are so much easier now! Here are a few things you may need:

- **Ice Pack**

Keep your lunch cool and at the right temperature until lunch.

- **Plastic containers**

Containers of all shapes and sizes can make packing fruit, salads, sandwiches and sides super easy. This is also a great way to help the environment!

- **Thermos**

This can completely expand your meal choice options. Soups and chili on a cold day or cool chicken salad can be great choices!

- **Water bottle**

Guess what you put in a water bottle... water! Yes, that's right, the healthiest drink of all! A cool water bottle can go a long way with kids. In January 2017, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released a study that showed almost two-thirds of children in the United States consumed at least one sugary beverage on any given day, and roughly 30 percent consumed two or more a day. That is a lot of sugar!

GET YOUR KIDS INVOLVED:

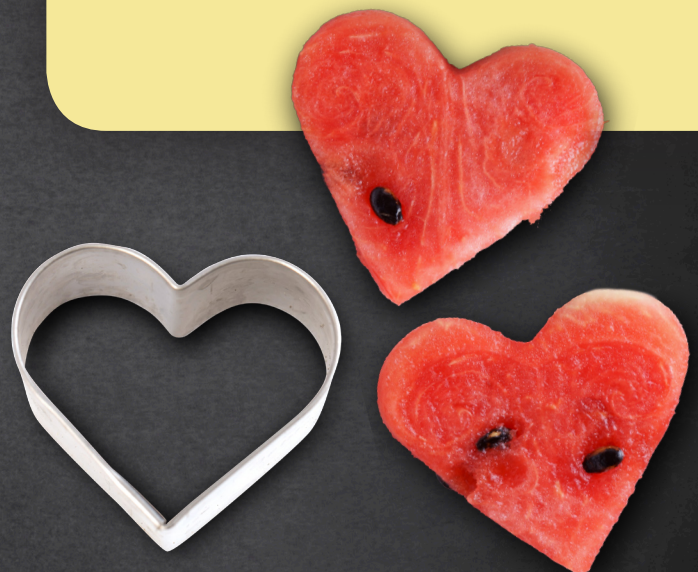
One year, I packed my daughter yogurt every day in her lunch. I learned after four months that she threw it away every single day. That was my fault for packing her what I thought she should have without asking her for ideas. Talk about foods they would like to include and even ask them to come to the grocery store with you! Another idea is to have your kids pack their own lunch.

GIVE YOUR LUNCH SOME CHARACTER:

Grab some cookie cutters and use them to make fun-shaped sandwiches or heart-shaped watermelon slices. Use lunch box notes as a way to connect with your kids. Write a funny joke, wish them luck on a test or just say hi!

COOK A LITTLE EXTRA:

Having grilled chicken on Sunday night? Grill up some extra chicken breasts to chop up in a salad or put in a whole grain tortilla. Think of this often. Last night's dinner can be tomorrow's lunch!



Helpful Recipes TO ADD TO SCHOOL LUNCHES

Create this recipe the night before for dinner. Make a little extra and serve cold the next day in your child's lunch box!



Chicken-Veggie Quesadillas with Ranch Yogurt Sauce

www.sparkrecipes.com

Ingredients:

- 1/4 cup low-fat plain Greek yogurt
- 2 tsp Ranch seasoning blend
- 12 ounces boneless and skinless chicken breast
- 1 tsp canola oil
- 2 red or orange bell peppers, top and bottom removed, cored and seeded
- 4 whole-wheat tortillas
- 2 tomatoes, diced
- 1/2 cup shredded Monterey or Pepper Jack cheese

Directions:

1. In a small bowl, make the sauce by combining the yogurt and 1/2 teaspoon of the seasoning blend. Cover and chill in the refrigerator.
2. Place the chicken into a plastic bag. Using a meat mallet or rolling pin, pound out the meat to 1/4-inch thickness. Add oil and remaining seasoning blend to the bag. Marinate meat 10 minutes or up to 8 hours.
3. Place a cast-iron skillet or nonstick skillet over moderate heat. Once warmed, add the peppers. Sear the peppers by pressing down on them for 2 to 3 minutes. Remove from heat, let cool slightly and dice.
4. Place the chicken in the skillet (discard the marinade) and cook over moderate-high heat for 4 to 5 minutes. Turn and continue to cook until internal temperature reaches 165° Fahrenheit, about 5 minutes more. Remove the meat from the skillet, let cool slightly and dice. Wipe out the skillet with paper towels.
5. Reheat the skillet to moderate heat. Build the quesadillas one at a time by placing a tortilla in the pan, then layering on half of the chicken, peppers, tomatoes and cheese. Top with a second tortilla and cook for 2 minutes on each side until the cheese melts. Remove the cooked quesadilla to a cutting board. To serve, cut each quesadilla in half with a pizza wheel if you have one. Serve with the ranch sauce.

No Bake Energy Bites

www.allrecipes.com

Ingredients:

- 1 cup rolled oats
- 1/2 cup mini semi-sweet chocolate chips
- 1/2 cup ground flax seed
- 1/2 cup crunch peanut butter
- 1/3 cup honey
- 1 tsp vanilla extract

Directions:

Combine ingredients in a bowl. Mix with your hands and form into balls. Arrange on baking sheet and freeze for one hour.



Main Dish Ideas:

Find a Thermos

This is a great way to use your leftovers!

- Chicken, pork or steak with a side of barbecue sauce
- Soups, chili or mac and cheese
- Last night's dinner – Spaghetti, stir fry or casserole



Sandwich or Wrap

- Whole-grain bread with lunch meat
- Whole-grain tortilla with peanut butter and banana (or any fruit - try strawberry!)
- Cheese quesadilla (wrap in aluminum foil)

Salads To-go

- Lettuce, veggies and protein (use last night's protein)
- Cold pasta salad with grilled chicken
- Tuna or chicken salad



Go Meat-free

- Yogurt, fruit and granola
- Cottage cheese and fruit
- Make your own pizza – English muffin or tortilla, pizza sauce and cheese (Kids assemble!)
- Ants on a log (celery/peanut butter/raisins)
- Apples and nut butter
- Pretzels with cheese



Sensible Lunchbox Sides:



- ☐ Edamame
- ☐ Baked chips
- ☐ Almonds
- ☐ Peppers and hummus
- ☐ Sliced cucumber and dip
- ☐ Side salad
- ☐ Low-fat yogurt
- ☐ Banana
- ☐ Graham crackers
- ☐ No-sugar-added applesauce
- ☐ Walnuts
- ☐ Strawberries
- ☐ Blueberries
- ☐ Pears
- ☐ Cottage Cheese
- ☐ Whole-grain crackers
- ☐ Pretzels
- ☐ Popcorn
- ☐ Pasta salad
- ☐ Avocado slices
- ☐ Raspberries
- ☐ Dried fruit
- ☐ Animal crackers
- ☐ Last night's veggies
- ☐ Berries and fruit dip
- ☐ Cheese cubes
- ☐ Fresh fruit cup



SOMETHING SWEET

A sweet treat is great every once in a while as well. Balancing a healthy meal with a small treat is a great plan. Opt for small portions of treats, but don't count out foods with natural sweetness. Fruits and low-fat flavored yogurts can be great ways to add a sweet taste without a lot of added sugar. Give them a try!

WHAT ABOUT SCHOOL LUNCH?

On a busy day, is a school lunch an option? It can be, and school lunches can be okay. There are certain standards by the National School Lunch Program that set a requirement for serving fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat milk. Is it perfect? No, but on a busy day, it can be a better option than chips, cookies and a juice box. Don't count it out!

AND AT THE END OF IT ALL...

There are so many options to choose from, and finding the balance between a healthy lunch and something your child may eat can be difficult. Take your time and sneak in a few healthy options here or there. You'll be glad you did in the long run!

About the Author:

Sarah Muntel, RD, is a Registered Dietitian and Bariatric Coordinator at Community Bariatric Surgeons in Indianapolis, IN. She has worked with bariatric surgery patients for 17 years and especially enjoys leading support groups. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her husband and three children.





ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



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The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



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