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smarter lunches

Packing nutritious meals won't just banish the brown bag blues. It can also help your child do better in school.

Move over breakfast. New research suggests that a nutritious midday meal may be just as important, boosting youngsters' school success as it enhances their health. Unfortunately, packed lunches often miss the mark, says Danielle Hollar, Ph.D., assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. But by following a few simple guidelines, even a kid can pack a delicious lunch with a nutritious punch.

Bettering Brain and Body According to *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, one in three kids ages 2 to 19 is overweight, and 17 percent are obese. Obesity puts kids at risk for health problems like high blood pressure and diabetes. "Surprisingly, we found that the most hypertensive children in our school studies were kindergartners, first and second graders," Hollar says. So it's never too early to think about what you pack in your child's lunch box.

Hollar worked with six schools in Florida to improve the quality of cafeteria lunches and to educate students about smarter eating. Her research showed that adding nutritious options to the menus significantly improved children's weight and blood pressure. Children who ate healthier school lunches also "had significantly higher standardized test scores in math and reading compared with children in schools that were not part of the nutrition enhancements," Hollar says.

Pleasing Picky Eaters If your children are finicky eaters, hands-on experience can help. "Cook with them, shop with them, let them make choices and let them be part of the process," says chef Ann Cooper, coauthor of *Lunch Lessons: Changing the Way We Feed Our Children* (Harper Paperbacks, 2007). Be patient: Research shows it may take 12–17 exposures to a new food before a child accepts it, notes Cooper.

When packing school lunches, involve your kids, says Liz Weiss, R.D., coauthor of *No Whine with Dinner* (M3 Press, 2011) and blogger at the website mealmakeovermoms.com/kitchen. "For example, give your kids three options within a food category, such as bell pepper strips, cucumber slices and crunchy blanched green beans," Weiss says.

To encourage your child to eat an unfamiliar food,

Weiss suggests pairing it with a familiar one, such as serving a favorite reduced-fat dip with a new vegetable. "Don't be afraid to shake up the flavor of common offerings either," she says. "For example, try honey mustard or pesto on kids' sandwiches."

Experiment with serving methods too. "Cutting produce with fun-shaped cookie cutters or serving it as kebabs often gets kids excited about trying something healthy," says Nancy Rice, R.D., president of the School Nutrition Association.

Packing Smart Targeting the number of food group servings to age and activity level will help ensure your kids are getting the nutrients they need. A balanced lunch, says Weiss, includes lean protein, a vegetable, a fruit, a whole grain and a good calcium source.

Visit ChooseMyPlate.gov for help with serving sizes. An active 5-year-old girl, for example, needs 1½ cups of fruit a day, which could be divided into several small servings, whereas an active 16-year-old boy needs 2½ cups. "If you're uncertain how much to pack for your child and they're at a healthy weight, pay attention to portion sizes they eat at home and pack a similar amount," Weiss says.

Both Weiss and Cooper recommend providing children with small servings of several items. "That encourages kids to taste a lot of different things instead of just one large item, such as a big sandwich," Cooper says.

Need some fresh ideas? Try the tasty, nutritious lunches shown opposite. 🌱

bag lunch bargains

Check out the weekly ads from your neighborhood Publix for savings on lunch fixings, from fresh fruits and vegetables to low-fat yogurt and whole grain bread. Find this week's specials at publix.com

cafeteria makeovers

No time to pack a lunch? Not to worry: School lunches are getting healthier. Last December, President Obama signed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. Starting in the 2012–2013 school year, kids will have more healthy options like fresh fruits and vegetables, lower fat dairy products and whole grains.

mix & match meals

For a balanced lunch, choose an item from each category *below*. Keep hot, saucy foods safe with a thermos rated to maintain temperatures for at least 5 hours. Pack a frozen drink box with foods that need to be kept cold. For more ideas, see the suggested lunch boxes at *right*.

PROTEIN AND GRAIN

- Leftover chili with whole grain corn muffin
- Lean deli roast beef on a whole wheat mini bagel
- Whole grain rotini pasta salad with chicken
- Hard-boiled egg and natural granola bar
- Leftover whole wheat spaghetti and meatballs

VEGETABLE

- Kohlrabi sticks
- Cucumber slices
- Blanched broccoli florets
- Romaine lettuce with reduced-fat dressing
- Sugar snap peas

FRUIT

- Peeled kiwi slices
- Fruit kebabs
- Mango chunks drizzled with lime juice
- Sectioned mandarin orange
- Unsweetened organic applesauce

DAIRY

- Light string cheese
- Sliced reduced-fat Swiss cheese
- Reduced-fat cheddar cheese cubes
- Low-fat Greek yogurt
- Shredded part-skim mozzarella cheese



PB&J

Smart nutrition:

Use no-sugar-added jelly and natural peanut butter* in place of sweetened versions.

Your child can help:

Spread toppings on whole grain bread and portion the veggie chips.

*Note: Some schools restrict peanut products. If so, substitute another nut butter, or try an alternative like sunflower seed butter.



All-in-One

Smart nutrition:

Stuff a whole wheat tortilla with leftover grilled chicken to limit fat and sodium.

Your child can help:

Wash, pat dry and tear romaine lettuce and layer ingredients on the tortilla.



Variety Sampler

Smart nutrition:

Use nitrite-free turkey or ham luncheon meat, reduced-fat whole grain crackers and low-fat organic yogurt. Dried fruit has more calories than fresh, so limit portions.

Your child can help:

Count the crackers to equal a serving and measure out 1/4 cup raisins.



Finger Food

Smart nutrition:

Beat sliced bread boredom with whole grain pita wedges.

Your child can help:

Wash vegetables and spoon hummus and trail mix into containers.