

Healthy Lunchboxes

A healthy school lunch gives children energy to learn and play. Packing a nutritious lunch helps your child to eat well and influences their future eating habits. Involving your child in planning, shopping for and preparing their lunchbox develops their ability to make healthy choices and enjoy good food.

A healthy lunchbox

The food eaten at school should be about a third of the food consumed over the course of a day. Typically this would consist of lunch and a snack. Ideally this would include:

- **A lean protein food** such as: tuna or salmon (canned in spring water or oils such as canola, olive or sunflower), boiled eggs or lean meats such as chicken or beef. Vegetable protein sources can include tofu, nuts (where school nuts and anaphylaxis policies allow) and legumes/beans.
- **A starch food** such as: bread, rice, potatoes and pasta. There is a variety to choose from such as wholegrain, wholemeal or high fibre breads such as seeded rolls, Lebanese bread, pita, lavash, bagels, plain popcorn, a wholemeal low sugar muffin, brown and white rice or pasta.
- **Fruit and/or vegetable** such as: whole or chopped fruit, raw vegies such as carrot sticks, cherry tomatoes, cucumber or capsicum strips, canned fruit in natural juice or a small salad.
- **A reduced fat dairy food** such as: reduced fat yoghurt, reduced fat cheese, or reduced fat milk or their alternatives (remember to pack in an insulated container with an ice pack or frozen bottle of water).
- **Bottle of tap water** frozen on hot days to keep the lunchbox and your child cool. Sweetened drinks such as juice, cordial or soft drink are not recommended as these contain too much sugar, which is not good for dental teeth and contains no nutritional value.

What to do when it's not working

Even when you're doing all the right things the lunchbox food may come home uneaten.

- Involve your children in planning the lunch menu for the week and shopping to choose the fruit and vegetables for their lunchbox. Buying all the necessary fresh fruit and vegetables, meats, milk and yoghurt, bread and crackers in advance will also allow you to shop wisely for good quality and better value for money.
- Consider another type of lunchbox.
- Consider if the lunch is too fiddly. Some children are put off by fiddly packaging or don't like getting sticky hands. Try removing the orange peel or cut a kiwi fruit in half and add a spoon.
- Is it too much? If so, offer smaller servings. Half a sandwich might be more appropriate than a whole one.
- Is it too boring? Try to vary the lunches daily. Young children may appreciate it if sandwiches are cut different ways.

Get creative

Encourage your children to help prepare and pack their own school lunchbox. They can make their own snack packs from fresh ingredients which you can buy in bulk such as a small box or bag of dried fruit, rice cakes or unsalted and unsweetened popcorn. The internet offers a multitude of creative ideas if you search for healthy school lunchboxes.



Lunchbox Menu Ideas

There are a number of web sites referenced below that offer mix and match sample menus to help you keep the lunchboxes varied and so keep your kids interested in the food you provide. The following examples come from the NSW Healthy Kids website.

Lunchbox 1

- Fruit in season
- Boiled egg
- Vegetables with natural yoghurt
- Pita bread, filled with salad vegetables or tabouli and lean rissoles
- Water

Lunchbox 3

- Fruit in season
- Egg, lettuce, tomato, cheese multigrain sandwich
- Vegetable sticks
- Slice of fruit bread
- Dried fruit and nuts*
- Frozen UHT reduced fat milk 125mL

Lunchbox 2

- Wholemeal pikelets
- Frozen UHT reduced fat milk 125mL
- Vegetarian pizza or a sandwich
- Vegetable pack
- Fruit salad
- Reduced fat yoghurt

Lunchbox 4

- Fruit in season
- Bread roll filled with vegetables, cheese and a slice of lean roast beef
- Reduced fat yoghurt
- Grapes
- Water

* Where children do not have allergies or intolerance to nuts. Take note of the school's Anaphylaxis policy.

Food safety

When packing a school lunch, it is important to consider how the lunch will be kept cool to prevent foods and drinks from spoiling. If food is not stored properly, bacteria in the food can grow and make your children sick. For this reason it is essential to keep school lunches cool. Lunches kept in children's school bags all day are likely to get warm, and foods such as meat or cheese sandwiches, milk, cheese and yoghurt must be kept cool.

Try the following:

- To keep sandwiches fresh and protected from contamination, wrap them in plastic wrap or 'snaplock' plastic bags.
- Freeze small packs of UHT milk or water ahead of time and put into a lunchbox to keep it cool.
- When preparing lunches the night before they will be eaten, make sure they are stored in the fridge overnight.
- Choose a lunch box that includes a water bottle. Fill the bottle with water and freeze it, then place it in the lunch box to keep food cold.
- Insulated lunchboxes are also a great option.
- Remember to wash, rinse and thoroughly dry lunchboxes after every use to keep food safe.

References

Fresh Tastes – www.health.act.gov.au

The Heart Foundation – healthy-eating for mums has a variety of tools and recipes.
www.heartfoundation.org.au

The ACT Government and Canberra Hospital and Health services *TuckaTalk Pack a Lunch With Some Punch* Factsheet. www.health.act.gov.au

Nutrition Australia *What's For Lunch?* Factsheets and recipes www.nutritionaustralia.org

ACT@Nutrition Australia, *Packing The School Lunchbox*. www.nutritionaustralia.org/act

Lunchbox ideas and other resources at the NSW Government web site www.healthy-kids.com.au

Additional Resources

Good Habits for life for ACT Parents www.goodhabitsforlife.act.gov.au

Go to www.raisingchildren.net.au and search for nutrition

Nude Food Days promoting unpackaged food in lunchboxes www.nudefoodday.com.au

Resources for families about suitable nutrition for children www.vaccho.org.au