

Nutrition Matters

Nutrition Services, Community and Health Services

Packing healthy school lunches

Good nutrition = Good learning

The link between good nutrition and learning is well known. Children concentrate better and their learning is improved when they eat food from the four food groups from Canada's Food Guide. A healthy lunch provides the energy your child needs throughout the school day to learn, grow and play.

On average, children are eating too much fat, sugar and salt, and not enough vegetables, fruit, whole grains and milk products. Unhealthy lunches at school may be contributing to children's poor eating habits.

Since 80% of children are eating lunch at school, it is important that the foods they eat promote their overall well-being and their ability to learn.

For example, a lunch bag with a bologna sandwich, a fruit roll-up, cookies and fruit punch contains only two of the four food groups and too much fat, sugar and salt.

Once in a while, a lunch like this isn't harmful, but eating high fat, sweet and salty foods every day leads to eating habits that may stay with a child for life, possibly leading to obesity, heart disease, diabetes and other serious health problems.



What is a healthy lunch for kids?

A healthy lunch includes at least three of the four food groups from Canada's Food Guide.



There can be challenges to preparing a healthy lunch for your child.

"It takes too much time to prepare a healthy lunch!"

It is usually the last minute rush in the morning that drives many parents to make more convenient, rather than healthy choices for lunch. Take a few minutes after dinner each night to prepare a healthy lunch with your kids for the next day.

"But mom, everyone else gets to take fruit roll-ups for lunch!"

Kids want food that tastes good, is fun, fast to eat and looks appealing. They are influenced by the media and their friends. To help children enjoy the food they eat:

- Let your child make his own lunch choosing from a selection of foods from the four food groups
- Include your child's favourite foods
- Combine new foods with old favourites to add variety, but don't force your child to eat new foods if he doesn't want to
- Involve them in grocery shopping and planning their lunch

“My child will only eat jam sandwiches!”

Children are developing their tastes and may be very choosy about what they will eat. The more often children are exposed to new foods, the more likely they will taste them and learn to accept them. Don't be discouraged if your child refuses a new food experience. Sometimes it takes up to 15-20 attempts before a new food is accepted. Help your children to accept a wider selection of foods by:

- Being a role model. Set an example by trying new foods yourself
- Presenting foods in fun ways by combining different colours, textures and shapes
- Offering small quantities of the new food with a familiar one
- Encouraging them to become familiar with different foods by having them help grow, buy, prepare or serve them
- Respecting that each child has their own likes and dislikes

“It’s just so easy to pick up something ready to go and pack it in the lunch bag!”

Unfortunately, many convenience foods are expensive, and high in salt, sugar and fat. It is often the fancy packaging of convenience foods that kids like. Packing healthier foods in fun packages may help your child accept new foods. Try coloured lunch bags or plastic containers, or add stickers, special napkins and colourful straws for drinks. Checkout the chart on page 3 for ideas to help you reduce the number of convenience foods you pack for your child’s lunch.



The next time you and your child pack a lunch, keep the following in mind.



Choose milk!

Children who drink milk at lunch are more likely to meet their daily calcium needs. Chocolate milk is just as nutritious as white milk and provides lots of energy plus 15 essential nutrients. Chocolate milk contains about the same amount of sugar as an equal amount of 100% orange juice.

Check to see if your child's school has a milk program and sign him up so that he can have milk at school every day.

Sugar – a growing concern

Pop and fruit drinks are replacing more nutritious choices like milk and 100% fruit juice in children’s diets. This high intake of sugar provides extra calories and may be contributing to the increase in weight that we are seeing in children. Offer 100% juice, milk or water rather than pop, beverage, cocktail, drink, “ade” or punch.

One can of pop contains about 10 teaspoons of sugar

The caffeine connection

Not only does pop contain few nutrients, but it also may contain caffeine. Caffeine can cause nervousness, irritability, sleeplessness, and a fast heart beat. This may give students headaches, cause restlessness and fidgeting and can lead to behaviour difficulties in the classroom.



Convenience Food Knock-Out

This chart provides nutrition information for some convenience foods. Take a look at these popular kids lunch choices and consider the healthy alternative.

Can you choose the healthy winner?

In this corner...		And in this corner...
Instant Noodles in Powdered Soup Base	VS	Home Made Soup with Pasta and Vegetables
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep fried noodles are high in unhealthy saturated fat • Soup base is very high in salt • Minimal vegetables and vitamins 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower in fat and salt • Vegetables are rich in vitamins and have fibre
Convenience Lunch Kits	VS	Made at Home Lunch Kit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually more than half the calories come from fat • High in salt • Crackers made with white flour provide little fibre 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pack a plastic container with whole grain crackers, lean meat, cheese, raw veggies and fresh fruit • Lower in fat and salt • Higher in fibre, vitamins and protein
Cookies Dunked in Icing	VS	Lower Fat Cookies with Yogurt Dip
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contain saturated fat and may have trans fat • Cookies and frosting are high in sugar 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try arrowroots, gingersnaps, or animal crackers dipped in vanilla or fruit yogurt • Yogurt provides calcium to help build strong bones
Fruit Roll-Ups	VS	Fruit Cup
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contain lots of added sugar and little real fruit • Can stick to teeth and may cause cavities 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water packed mixtures do not have added sugar • Can buy individual sizes • Provides vitamins and fibre
Pop	VS	Milk
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One can of pop can have up to 10 teaspoons sugar • No nutritional value except calories • May contain caffeine 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be bought in individual containers • An excellent source of protein, calcium, vitamin D, and B vitamins • Chocolate milk is a healthy choice
Fruit Drinks	VS	Fruit Juice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Also called punch, cocktail, beverage or 'ade' • May have no more than 10% real juice • Contain lots of added sugar and few vitamins 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% pure fruit juice is high in vitamins • Can buy individual tetra packs
Mini Cheese and Cracker Sandwiches	VS	Low fat Cheese (20% MF or less) and Whole Wheat Crackers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contain saturated fat and may have trans fat • High in salt and low in fibre 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher in fibre and calcium • Lower in fat
Sports Drinks	VS	Water
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contain added sugar and salt • Not needed during regular daily activities, only needed for long, intense physical activity (more than 1 hour) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent thirst quencher • A squirt of lemon or lime juice will add extra flavour • Free from a tap

Looking at the match-ups, it's easy to see who the champions are!

Pack healthy choices the next time you pack your child's lunch and snacks.



Does your child's lunch look like this?	Try the healthier alternatives for lunches and snacks
Jam sandwich Potato chips Pop	Cheese (20% MF or less) sandwich Baked tortilla chips Banana pudding cup made with milk Water
Cold waffles Syrup Applesauce Gummy bears Lemonade	Vegetable soup (in thermos) Whole grain crackers Unsweetened applesauce Oatmeal cookies Milk
Pre-packaged lunch kit (bologna, cheese and crackers) Chocolate covered granola bar Orange drink	Lean sliced chicken Cheddar cheese (20% MF or less) Whole grain crackers Vegetable sticks Cereal bar 100% orange juice
Salami sandwich Chocolate bar Fruit punch	Left over cheese and vegetable pizza Yogurt Carrot sticks with low fat salad dressing Fig cookies 100% apple juice

Include Healthy Snacks

Make sure to include enough food in the lunch bag for a healthy snack. It is important for children to eat a least one healthy snack at school every day. Children's growing bodies need lots of nutrients, which they often don't get enough of from their three main meals. For ideas on healthy snacks see *Nutrition Matters: Snacks That Make the Grade* fact sheet.

What if my child brings most of his lunch home?

Don't worry too much about this. Start the day with a healthy breakfast. Skipping breakfast may lead to becoming overweight and also may affect learning and classroom behaviour. Lastly, end the day as well as it started. If your child traded his whole-grain sandwich for a friend's cake, make sure that a healthy dinner makes up for it!



Pack a safe and environmentally-friendly lunch

- When preparing food, first wash your hands with soap and warm water, and start with a clean countertop and clean utensils
- In the morning pack cold foods directly from the refrigerator and make sure that hot foods are steaming hot when placed in a thermos. Foods that might spoil should be carried in an insulated bag to keep them cold or hot
- To keep foods cold, use frozen bread for sandwiches, or a small freezer pack with the lunch
- Use cloth bags, lunch boxes, thermos containers, thermal bags and re-usable plastic containers for sandwiches and other lunch foods instead of paper or plastic bags. Use washable utensils instead of disposable cutlery. Make sure these items are washed every day
- Wrappings should not be re-used because they may carry bacteria