



SACK LUNCHES: What to pack?

With school opening, it's time to think about what our children will eat during the day. Some children like to take a sack lunch to school. But the dilemma is always what to pack. With a little planning, a sack lunch can be nutritious as well as time- and cost-efficient.

- Talk to your children about what they would like in their lunches. But remember, parents need to take final responsibility to provide healthy as well as time- and cost-efficient meals.
- This is a great opportunity to teach menu planning techniques. A sack lunch needs to have all the food groups: a bread; meat or protein; fruit; vegetable; and dairy. Consider portion sizes appropriate to the age and activity level of the child.
- Obesity among children has reached epidemic proportions with approximately 30 percent of children being overweight or at-risk of overweight. Remember that learning skills to plan, prepare, and eat balanced meals will help children both to stay healthy now and to prevent many chronic diseases as they mature into adulthood.
- Make a list of food items needed for sack lunches before doing weekly grocery shopping.
- Check the nutrition label and cost before purchase of prepackaged items. Many prepackaged snack items may be high in sugar, fat, or sodium. They may also be more costly than home-prepared snack bags.
- Set aside some time on the weekend to prepackage small snack bags of cut-up vegetables. Include cherry tomatoes; baby carrots; cut-up peppers; broccoli, etc. Use whatever tastes good and looks attractive.
- Other ideas for foods to prepackage: 3-4 tablespoons of nuts or seeds with dried fruit; small bunch of grapes; cubes of natural cheese.
- Pack lunches the night before to reduce the time crunch in the morning. Allow kids to help. To ensure safety and freshness, some sandwiches can be frozen and popped into a sack lunch in the morning. Meat sandwiches or meat/cheese combos freeze very well.
- If including a sweet, consider home preparation or purchase of items with whole grains, nuts, and/or fruit which add flavor and important nutrients.
- Food safety is always an issue for food prepared ahead and eaten at a later time. Use an ice pack or determine if the school has a refrigerator for sack lunches. Utilize less perishable items for sandwiches such as peanut butter or cheese. Avoid mixtures of meat or egg with salad dressing unless refrigeration is present.
- Include milk from the school cafeteria as a beverage choice for sack lunches. Food consumption data indicate that many children are not receiving the recommended amount of calcium in their diet. Calcium is not only needed to build healthy bones but has been implicated in helping to control body weight. Alternative beverage choices include bottled water or 100 percent fruit juice. Eliminate or limit sweetened beverages including soda.
- Sample menu idea: peanut butter sandwich, baby carrots and cherry tomatoes; bunch of grapes; peanuts with dried prunes or apricots; oatmeal raisin cookie; fluid milk (from cafeteria). Remember to add extra food if your child is involved in after-school activities and needs a nutritious snack.

References

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