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What Can I Pack my Kids for Lunch?

By Sheila Gains, Family and Consumer Science Agent, Arapahoe County

What can I pack that won't spoil by lunch time and contains a well balanced selection of healthy foods that my child will eat? Have you asked yourself this question lately? Every fall, as school starts, many parents face the dilemma of what to pack for lunch.



Here are some tips to help you and your child select and pack healthy, safe and tasty lunches:

- Make a list of all the food options your child will eat by food group: grains, fruits, vegetables, meat/protein, dairy, and other foods such as dips, sauces, snacks and desserts. Get kids involved in making the list.
- Indicate which food items will need refrigeration or an insulated lunch box and a frozen gel pack. A frozen juice box or frozen water bottle can be used in place of a gel pack for keeping food cool and safe until lunch time.

Sample Food List:

	√ = Needs refrigeration
Grains (select whole grain when possible)	
Crackers, Bread sticks	
Bread, Muffins, Biscuits	
Tortilla, Pita	
Rice cakes, Popcorn	
Dry cereal	
Fruits (some fruit leathers and fruit snacks have very little fruit and a lot of sugar)	
Fresh, whole (apple, orange, pear, peach, kiwi, banana, etc.)	
Dried (fruit leather, raisins, cran-raisins etc.)	
Canned in juice or light syrup (fruit cups etc.)	√ If can/cup is opened.
Vegetables (some vegetable juices are high in salt)	
Fresh (raw carrots, celery, pea pods, broccoli or cherry tomatoes, etc.)	
Dried (carrot, or zucchini chips, etc.)	
Canned (vegetable juice, vegetable soup, etc.)	√ If can is opened.
Protein –Meats, Nuts, Beans & Cheese	
Fresh meat (sliced cooked meat or left-over's)	√

Peanut or tree nut butters (check with school for allergy restrictions)	
Cheese, slices, cubes or sticks (string cheese)	√
Beans (refried, hummus, pork and beans, etc).	√ If fresh, or can is opened.
Hard boiled egg	√
Tuna	√ If can or pouch is opened.
Dairy (cold fluid milk is often sold at school)	
Fluid milk	√ Unless the package states it requires no refrigeration.
Yogurt	√
Yogurt drink	√
Pudding made with milk	√ Unless the package states it requires no refrigeration.
Cottage cheese	√
Others (limit these)	
Cookies, Chips, etc.	
Dips for vegetables or fruit. (salsa, ranch, yogurt, etc)	√ If container is opened.

- Take kids shopping, or let them shop from the items you bring home to build their lunches. Provide a variety of whole grains, and foods naturally low in fat and added sugar. Limit the number of salty, high fat and high sugar treats they pack to one a day. Children often eat these tasty foods first, instead of the other healthy foods in their lunch, making it hard for them to get all the nutrients they need each day.
- Have plenty of snack and sandwich size plastic zip bags or reusable containers on hand.
- Ask kids to pick and pack at least one serving from each of the five food groups.
- Have a few gel packs, 100% juice boxes or water bottles frozen and ready to use.
- A reusable bottle filled with ice water and packed with lunch also helps keep other foods cold and reminds children to drink more water.

Lets Talk: Letting kids help pick what goes into their lunch is a great way to start a conversation about nutrition and health. Encouraging them to pick at least one item from each of the major food groups helps them understand the concept of eating a variety of food everyday.

Don't worry if kids come home with food that was not eaten. Some days children will be hungry and focused on eating. Other days they might not be as hungry, perhaps they were distracted or had a food treat in the classroom before lunch, etc. Occasionally ask children if they think they're packing enough, too much, or want some different food choices. Assure children that these questions are not meant to make them feel bad that they didn't clean their plate/lunch box. But it helps them make adjustments to how much and what they pack the next time.

Recipe for Health:

Bean Dip (Kids love to dunk crackers and veggies into this dip!)

Ingredients:

1 can (16 ounce) fat free refried beans

½ cup mild salsa

Directions:

1. In a mixing bowl, combine refried beans and salsa.
2. Divide bean dip into reusable plastic containers (1/2 – 2/3 cup per serving).
3. Store in the refrigerator until ready to use.

For a well balanced lunch include ½ cup-2/3 cup bean dip, 6-12 whole wheat crackers, 4-6 carrot sticks, a stick of string cheese and an orange (whole, peeled or quartered). Pack in an insulated lunch box with a frozen gel pack. Buy cold low fat milk at school or pack a bottle of water.

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