

What makes a healthy lunch?

Pass the school lunchbox test with our easy, healthy food suggestions.



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All out of ideas for a healthy school lunch?

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Eating healthy food helps children concentrate and learn, so it's really important for your child to have a healthy lunchbox at school.

The best lunch is one that's nutritious, quick to make, and fun and easy to eat. Encouraging your children to be involved in choosing foods and preparing their lunch increases the odds it will all be eaten – and enjoyed!

Lunchbox building blocks

Build a good lunch for your kids with the following healthy lunchbox ideas:

Starchy food

A carbohydrate-based food is a good starting point for a lunch to fill hungry tummies. This can be bread, pasta, rice, potatoes (not chips!) or couscous, for example.

Sandwiches are often the lunchbox staple, but can get boring day after day. Keep kids interested by using a variety of breads, including wholemeal, white, rye, rolls, wraps, pita, bagels, focaccia and rice cakes.

Protein-y food

Lean meat, tinned tuna, egg, tofu and baked beans are good high-protein foods for filling sandwiches, or for adding to food like pasta or rice salad. Importantly, most provide iron as well.

Nuts and peanut butter are also good protein sources, but check first if your school has a nut-free policy to protect children with severe allergies.

Protein-rich dairy foods like yoghurt and cheese are also good sources of calcium, which is essential for growing bodies – especially for strong bones.

Fruit and veggies

For plenty of vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre, try to include at least a serve each of fruit and veg in every lunchbox.

Kids might find vegetables more interesting served as sticks with dip, mixed together with pasta, or as topping for a mini pizza.

Pack fruit and veg that are manageable and easy to eat: fruit salad, mandarins or pre-peeled oranges, seedless grapes, cherry tomatoes or snow peas, for example.

Drinks

Don't forget a drink! Active bodies need plenty of fluid to keep them well hydrated, and water is the best choice, although milk – either cow's or soy with added calcium – is good too.

Drinks can linger in kids' mouths, so sugary ones may increase the risk of tooth decay; **100% fruit juice** can be diluted. Drinks with added sugar that don't provide the same nutritional goodies as fruit juice – sweetened juice, "fruit drinks", cordial and fizzy drinks, for example – are best left out altogether.

Other things to consider

Lunchbox safety

Food-poisoning bugs can grow quickly in foods like cooked meats, fish, chicken and salads, particularly in warm weather. And because lunchboxes may sit around for several hours before the food is eaten, there's plenty of opportunity for this to happen. Follow these suggestions to help keep food safe:

Hygiene. Make sure your hands, chopping board and utensils are clean and dry before preparing food.

Keep the food cold. Use an insulated lunchbox and/or put a freezer pack in with the food to keep it cool. Alternatively, include a frozen drink bottle in the lunchbox – it should defrost by lunchtime. If the school provides a refrigerator, make sure your child uses it.

Preparation. Save time and keep food cool by freezing sandwiches the night before (or even prepare and freeze sandwiches for a week in advance). Foods suitable for freezing include bread, cooked meat, cheese, peanut butter, baked beans, mashed eggs and Vegemite. Yoghurt and fruit, like grapes and banana or citrus segments, can be frozen too.

Snacks

Pre-packaged snacks for kids' lunchboxes can be convenient, but not all are healthy enough to include regularly. Our reviews of these snack foods have consistently found that very few meet our four nutritional criteria of acceptable energy, saturated fat, sugar and sodium levels.