



Healthy lunch boxes for children

Healthy lunches and snacks are important for children and help with concentration and learning. Healthy eating changes are not always easy to make.

Try to set a good example with your lunches. Encourage children to be involved in their own lunch preparation, and their choices about foods to include. Praise your child when they choose well.

There are limited times for children to eat during the day, especially at school. Children may prefer to play with friends instead of eating.

Encourage your child to sit and eat before heading out to play, or talk to your school about making sure all children get a chance to eat enough before play starts.

Six items to put in a lunch box

- fresh fruit
- crunchy vegetables
- a dairy food – cheese, milk or yoghurt
- protein food – slice of lean meat, hard boiled egg or peanut butter
- starchy food – bread, roll, flat bread, fruit bread or crackers
- water.

Food suggestions

There are endless food choices available for lunch boxes. It can sometimes be difficult to decide which foods are healthy choices.

Fruit

Best choices. Fresh or tinned fruit. Dried fruit is sticky, and high in sugar, so eat occasionally or as part of a meal.

Best left out. Dried fruit bars and 'straps' are very high in sugar, low in fibre and stick to children's teeth causing tooth decay.

Vegetables

Best choices. Try vegetable sticks with dips, or a small container with mixed vegetables such as cherry tomatoes, carrot sticks, peas or cucumber.

Best left out. Packets of crisps are best left for parties.

Dairy

Best choices.

- Cheese slices, cubes or sticks.
- Yoghurt – natural or fruit yoghurt. Try freezing a tub of yoghurt and putting it in your lunch box. By lunchtime it will have partially thawed and be ready to eat.
- Milk.

Best left out. 'Dairy desserts' and flavoured milks are high in sugar.

Sandwiches

Include a variety of bread and fillings, especially if children begin to lose interest in sandwiches.



Best choices.

Choose one or more of the following.

- Salmon or tuna in springwater. Try the mini cans of tuna with added flavours.
- Cheese – preferably reduced fat cheese.
- Egg.
- Falafel or lentil patties.
- Sliced lean cold meats such as ham, turkey, chicken, lamb, beef or meatballs.
- Baked beans or bean salad.
- Peanut butter or vegemite.
- Grated carrot, lettuce or tomato.

Include bread or rolls, flat bread, fruit loaf or buns, bagels, corn or rice cakes, Turkish bread, crisp bread or pikelets.

As an alternative try:

- pasta – make a salad with lots of raw vegetables
- rice – when making fried rice, minimise oil and add lots of steamed vegetables.

Best left out. Avoid chocolate spreads, jams and honey. Avoid fatty meats such as salami and strasbourg.

Biscuits and dips

Best choices. Dry biscuits, crispbreads, rice cakes, with yoghurt or hummus dips.

Best left out:

- 'Oven baked' savoury biscuits are just as high in salt and fat as crisps.

Muffins and cakes

Try making your own healthy muffins and cakes. Include fruit and vegetables such as sultanas, carrot, zucchini, banana and pumpkin.

Best left out. Offer donuts and cakes at birthdays and special occasions instead of lunch boxes.

Muesli and 'breakfast' bars

Almost all 'bars' are too high in sugar however some cereal bars are better for teeth than chewy, sticky muesli type bars.

Try to avoid chocolate bars and muesli bars in lunch boxes. These are expensive and stuck together with fats and sugar.

Best drinks

Water and milk are the best drinks for children. They can be frozen to help keep foods in the lunch box cool.

All sweet drinks such as fruit juices, juice drinks, cordials, sports drinks, flavoured mineral waters and soft drinks are high in sugar and not necessary. These drinks can increase risk of tooth decay, are 'filling' and may take the place of healthier foods.

Practicalities for busy families

Foods should be simple and easy to prepare, 'ready' to eat and appetising after several hours of storage in the lunch box.

Foods such as sandwiches can be prepared the night before or on the weekend, frozen then taken for each day's lunch box. Suitable foods to freeze are: bread, cooked meat, cheese, peanut butter, baked beans or vegemite.

Food safety

In most cases food is stored in lunch boxes for several hours, so the lunch box needs to be kept cool.

- Choose an insulated lunch box or one with a freezer pack, or include a wrapped frozen water bottle to keep the lunch box cool. Two smaller boxes may be more convenient than a single large one.
- Perishable foods such as dairy products, eggs and sliced meats should be kept cool, and eaten within about four hours of preparation. Don't pack these foods if just cooked. First cool in the refrigerator overnight.
- If you include left over meals such as meats, pasta and rice dishes, ensure you pack a frozen iceblock into the lunch box.

School canteens

Some schools have a canteen, while others may use a local shop or milk bar to provide lunches for children. The

individual school needs to decide what types of foods are made available to children. If less healthy foods are available, it is best to choose these foods only occasionally.

Peer pressure

Children are influenced by food advertising and their friends' food choices.

Remember that not all children go to school with lunch boxes filled with chips and lollies, despite what children think and say! It is important to keep offering healthy lunch box choices in a variety of ways, as children learn to eat what is familiar to them. And remember that it may take time to change your child's food preferences to more healthy choices.

Important lunch box tips

Include:

- fresh fruit
- crunchy vegetables
- dairy food – cheese, milk or yoghurt
- protein food – slice of lean meat, hard-boiled egg or peanut butter
- starchy foods – bread, rice or pasta
- water.

Best left out:

- muesli and chocolate bars
- potato crisps and oven baked savoury biscuits
- sweet drinks
- donuts and cakes
- lollies, honey and jams
- fatty meats such as salami and strasbourg.

For more information about child nutrition visit:

www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au

For more details about food safety at home visit:

www.health.vic.gov.au/foodsafety