

Tackling the Lunch Crunch

Like many routine tasks in life, packing school lunches can become dull and predictable—which can lead to making unhealthy food choices for kids. More frustratingly, when we do prepare tuna with sliced carrots and low-salt pretzels, we cannot help wondering if the lunch was eaten or (worse) traded for cookies and soda.

There are no absolutes when packing a child's lunch. What might be a favorite food this week, might be snubbed the next. But we cannot avoid this daily pursuit. What we need instead is a realistic plan of attack that makes lunchtime easy for parents—and nutritious for kids.

The first thing to do is to plan out one week's worth of lunches at a time. This might sound like a daunting task, but it will help save time and frustration. If your children are old enough, include them in this process. If they help select and prepare their lunches, chances are they will be more inclined to actually eat what's in the lunch box. (Speaking of which, it might be time to upgrade your child's lunch box to a durable, insulated version—one that he or she helps pick out.)

Before planning lunches to bring in, take a look at the choices sold at school each week. According to the FDA, many schools are taking extra steps to offer leaner menus that are varied and filling. There may be one or two hot lunches along with salads or sandwiches that you may want your children to purchase. For the remaining days, think about variety, balance, and moderation. Then, give your child several options and let them make the final decisions (bring them along when shopping as well, if possible, and definitely include them in the packing process). A few things to keep in mind:

- **Cheese sticks** are convenient and fun for kids to eat—and give a healthy dose of calcium. Look for low-fat and fat-free varieties.
- Always include **two fruits or vegetables**. You can easily pack a small apple, pear, or banana, and a single serving of applesauce into a lunch box. Or, slice up red peppers, cucumbers, melon, pineapples, or strawberries.
- Focus on **lean meats** (or tuna) for sandwiches, and use only **100% whole grain breads** or wraps (“whole wheat flour” must be first ingredient on the label). Add in spinach, grated carrots, tomatoes or lettuce for extra nutrition.
- **Once a week, go meatless** with an all-vegetable sandwich or wrap, a bean and cheese burrito, or honey and peanut (or almond) butter sandwich.
- **Other delicious lunch items** include a hard-boiled egg, bagel with peanut butter or low-fat cream cheese, a baggie filled with whole grain cereal or granola, raisins and nuts, pasta salad, and (if you cannot avoid it) a bag of baked potato or tortilla chips, pretzels or veggie chips.

When planning lunches, keep in mind that most children over age six require about 2,200 calories per day (teen boys need about 2,800 calories a day), according to the FDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans. All school children should watch the types of fat and how much salt they eat to lower their risk of high blood cholesterol and high blood pressure.

Enjoy making the granola recipe (*right*) with your kids to include in their lunches (you can even pack some in your own lunch for work).

HOMEMADE GRANOLA

- 2 c. oats
- ⅓ c. brown sugar
- 1 tsp. cinnamon
- ½ c. chopped nuts (pecans, walnuts, almonds)
- ¼ c. sunflower seeds
- ¼ c. butter
- 3 tbsp. honey
- ¼ c. dried fruit (cranberries, raisins, apricots or blueberries)

Combine oats, brown sugar, spices, nuts and sunflower seeds in a medium bowl; melt butter and honey in a small saucepan and pour over oat mixture. Spread in lightly greased cookie sheet. Cook for about 30 minutes at 300°F, stirring several times, careful not to let cereal burn. Cool and stir in fruit.

