

## Back to School hip and healthy eating tips

It's school time again! The decision over healthy meals vs. convenience foods can be a struggle with busy schedules. As the school year picks up, you might find yourself questioning if you need to hit the cook**books** for some nutrition upgrades.

Healthy eating should include a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, foods high in complex carbohydrates, low in fat, free of cholesterol, low-fat dairy products, lean meat, poultry, and fish.

Getting breakfast in, snacks and lunch packed, and out the door on time for school, may move you towards convenience foods... Good nutrition is important for good learning. Research shows that children who regularly eat breakfast have better test scores and better behavior than children who skipped breakfast.

Breakfast supplies energy that the brain and body need for learning and daily activities. Sugary breakfast cereals, white-flour pancakes and syrup will leave your child hungry and tired half way through the morning. Good examples are whole grain cereals topped with yogurt and sliced bananas, a breakfast smoothie made with milk, fruit and a teaspoon of bran, or an egg with a slice of whole grain toast with nut butter, a piece of fruit and a glass of low-fat milk. Tofu and lean meat are also good choices at breakfast. Protein, and fiber from whole grains, will keep your child satisfied until lunch time.

Send fresh fruit, whole grain crackers, or nuts and cheese for middle of the morning snacks.

Eating healthy at lunch will help keep your child's mind sharp and ready to learn all afternoon. School cafeterias try to provide nutritious lunches along with offerings of fast foods. You can teach your kids the importance of eating right. With your help they could choose salads and vegetables instead of french fries, and water instead of soda. Another option is to send lunch with your kids. Hearty soups, salads, fruits, and sandwiches with whole grains can all be packed in insulated containers to stay hot or cold.

If you don't want your kids to toss or trade their lunch for less healthy meals, talk with them about the foods they like and the kind of lunches they want. The more they know and help, the more they'll eat their lunch. In packing your child's lunch, include at least one fruit or vegetable. Buy whole wheat bread or tortillas to make a sandwich, and fill it with a lean protein—such as turkey or chicken. Top with veggies, lettuce, tomato, avocado or peppers. Add low-fat cheese, yogurt or a carton of milk to include dairy. Now you have a lunch based on the five food groups.

When you pack a healthy lunch and find it untouched or discover the school lunch is ignored, don't panic. Children like to be social and get out and play, ignoring their stomachs. Studies show when schools schedule recess prior to lunch there's less plate waste. Become an advocate for your school to change the lunch period.

Serve up healthy snacks when kids get home like fresh fruits or low-fat cheese sticks. If you have fruits or vegetables peeled and ready, you may discover they want more. After-school snacks refuel a kid's body before play or study time. A handful of nuts and an apple is perfect, a healthy version of PB & J, or a snack tray of vegetables and dips.

It may seem impossible to eat supper together due to after-school activities. With a little planning it can be done. Review family schedules for the week. Plan a time and place where dinner can be eaten together. By preparing the night before you could have time to eat the meal at home, or consider packing a meal to eat at the event. This is usually healthier and less expensive.

### **Lunch Box Safety:**

Wash hands often while preparing lunches. Label lunches clearly and make sure the lunch box is clean.

Teach children to wash their hands before eating. Pack hot foods in well-insulated, tightly sealed containers until ready to eat. Invest in an insulated lunch box or use double paper bags. If students have access to a refrigerator at school, put lunches in the refrigerator as soon as they get to school. When sending perishable meals for lunch include a frozen icepack to help keep foods cold until lunchtime. A frozen individual juice box can serve as a cold pack. When packing lunch the night before, keep it in the refrigerator until your child leaves for school. Throw away all perishable leftovers after lunch.

### **Healthy Lunch Ideas:**

- Get out cookie cutters for sandwiches. Surprise kids with different shapes over the week.
- Go with what your child likes. Some kids don't like peanut butter but will enjoy cashew or almond butter as a spread.
- Serve sliced meat rolled up and offer the bread separate. Tuna salad can be offered with crackers. Bread doesn't have to be sliced bread; offer bagels, tortillas, rice or couscous.
- Make mini-sandwiches and place fun designed toothpicks in them. Offer bite-sized sandwiches or varieties of *tea sandwiches*.
- Use leftovers. Serve stew from last night's dinner for lunch. Use a thermos after heating it up in the morning. Tacos from dinner can be prepared in soft tortillas for lunch.
- Have cooked pasta on hand. Just throw on some sauce. If you make it the night before, add a touch of oil to prevent sticking.
- Use mini-tortillas and serve with beans and cheese. Many kids don't need to have their foods warmed up to enjoy. Offer beans and a tortilla separate; many kids like food separately.
- Breakfast for lunch: Make whole grain pancakes on Sunday and freeze the leftovers. You can warm them up and pack them for a fun lunch. Scrambled eggs or sliced boiled eggs can be a hit too.
- To make fruits and vegetables more fun, include a dip. Serve mini-carrots, broccoli or jicama with ranch dressing, sliced apples with peanut butter. Offer half of a sweet potato, or circular slices, with a sprinkle of brown sugar. Pack tropical fruits such as mango slices or kiwi that's easy to scoop out with a spoon.

Don't associate eating healthy with nagging. Keep it Fun and Positive! Keep healthy snacks on hand and avoid having chips, soda, and sugary treats in your home. It takes awhile to form good food habits but consistency is key. Prepare healthy, tasty foods regularly and your family will start to crave and eat healthier foods on their own.

Have a great school year, one that's full of healthy, nutritious meals!