

Packing Healthy School Lunches and Snacks FAQs

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1. Why are healthy lunches and snacks important at school?

Your child's school lunches and snacks are a major source of the essential vitamins and minerals they need to grow and develop over the years.

The foods you pack for your child will give them the energy and nutrients they need to learn and play at school. Without enough energy from food, they may feel tired and find it difficult to concentrate in class. Just like adults, if tasty healthy foods are not available when your child is hungry, the chances that he or she will reach for unhealthy junk food is greater.

The foods and beverages available at your child's school may be changing because of the [Ministry of Education's new School Food and Beverage policy](#). Here's what you need to know about [packing a healthier lunch](#).

2. What's a good approach to building a healthy lunch? (see chart and menu ideas)

Step one: Think food groups. Aim to have at least three of the four food group represented in your child's lunch. Check out [Canada's Food Guide](#) to review the food groups.

Step two: Think outside the sandwich! Get creative when choosing items for your child's lunch. Sometimes changing something as simple as the type of grain. For example, using pita, flatbread, tortilla, or cereal instead of bread can make lunch more interesting for your little eater. You may even want to write up a simple chart to brainstorm different options. Here are some ideas to get you started. Mix and match the options in the different columns to get a variety of lunch meals.

Veggies and Fruit	Grain Products	Milk and Alternatives	Meat and Alternatives
Pepper strips (red, green, yellow)	Tortillas, flatbread, nann or pita bread	Fruit yogurt or soy yogurt	Hard cooked egg
Peas in a pod or snow pea pods	Cold or hot cereal*	Yogurt dip (tzatziki) for veggies	Tuna, salmon or chicken salad flavoured with: curry, onions, light mayo, pickles, apples or dill
Baby corn	English muffins	Milk or fortified soy beverage*	Ham slices
Cherry tomatoes	Oatmeal muffins	Cheese cubes, cheese string or cheese slices	Hummus (tahini and ground chickpea dip)

Melon balls	Rice cakes	Milk-based pudding	Refried or baked beans
Fruit smoothie*	Whole grain crackers	Cottage or ricotta cheese cups	Hard cooked egg
Turnip or zucchini sticks	Chappati, roti	Milk-based soup*	Tuna or salmon sandwich
Cauliflower and broccoli trees	Pasta, brown rice, couscous, quinoa	Cheese-filled pasta (cannelloni, ravioli)*	Steamed soybeans (edamame)
Sliced mango	Bread sticks	Hot chocolate*	Marinated cooked tofu

* Foods that need to be kept cold or hot can be packed into a thermos to keep the food at a safe temperature. Cold foods can also be stored with an ice pack or frozen juice box.

Sample lunch #1: Pepper strips with hummus dip, and cheese-filled pasta with tomato sauce.

Sample lunch #2: Marinated cooked tofu in a whole wheat tortilla wrap with shredded lettuce and grated carrot. Add a fruit yogurt on the side.

Sample lunch #3: Why not breakfast for lunch? Hot cereal in a thermos topped with frozen berries and sliced almonds with a cold milk or soy beverage.

Was this article helpful? Tell us how. Please fill out our [short survey](#).

3. What should I do for snacks?

As you plan snacks, think of them as a “mini meal” that includes two of the four food groups. Try these simple nutritious snack ideas:

Whole grain crackers with a cheese stick.

Fresh cut fruit with a yogurt dip

Nut-free trail mix. Combine dried cranberries, raisins, dried apricots, and apple rings with sunflower and pumpkin seeds, along with your kid’s favourite cold cereal.

Yogurt tube and small oatmeal muffin

4. My children want the same thing to eat everyday. How can I introduce some new lunch ideas?

Your child's taste may change from one day to the next. Try new foods regularly and don't be afraid to try them more than once. You may have to offer new foods many times before your children learn to like them!

Children experience food using taste, touch and sight. Keep them interested with lunches that include a variety of shapes, colours and textures.

Cut sandwiches into triangles or diamonds. Use cookie cutters to make fun shapes.

Change the bread – try different kinds of grains (rye, pumpernickel, flax) as well as the type of bread like whole grain tortillas, bagels and pitas.

Offer various types of cheese (mozzarella, cheddar, Jack, Swiss) in different forms (cubes, strings, slices and balls). To create a cheese ball, shred and then shape into balls.

Switch up the veggies and fruit. Give your kids something different to experience with each bite. Group foods according to: Type (citrus, tropical.); color (green, red, orange, yellow, purple); shape (balls, strips, chunks, whole); or texture (soft, juicy, crunchy)

Kids love to dip. Use cottage cheese, [hummus](#), yogurt, or [guacamole](#) as healthy dips.

Try some of the kid approved recipes from our [Kids Recipe Challenge](#) winners.

5. How do I involve my child in deciding what to have for lunch and snacks?

From planning to packing, get everyone in the family involved when making lunches and snacks.

Give them healthy options to pick from - they will be more likely to eat a lunch that they choose.

Older children can help make sandwiches or stuff pitas, while younger children can place snacks

into containers.

Take your children grocery shopping and let them choose some of their favourite foods like breads, vegetables, fruit and yogurts. Use these [shopping tips](#) to help you guide your children in making healthy choices.

6. What foods should I keep on hand for preparing healthy lunches and snacks?

Pick a few from each list to keep on hand so that you'll always have healthy foods to pack in the lunchbox.

In the pantry:

Whole grain breads

Ready to eat cereals

Whole grain crackers

Canned and dried fruit

Canned tuna and salmon

Canned legumes like chick peas, black beans, baked beans in tomato sauce

In the fridge:

Yogurt (fruit yogurt, yogurt drinks, plain yogurt for dips, soy yogurt)

Cheese (block cheese or cheese strings, cottage cheese, cream cheese)

Milk

Fresh vegetables and fruit

In the freezer:

Whole grain pita and tortillas – they don't take up much space and you can use just one at a time. They defrost easily in the microwave.

Frozen fruits for smoothies

Leftovers like chili, lasagna, and soups in single-serving containers. (When you pack leftovers don't forget to label and date).

100% juice boxes for keeping lunch cool

In the cupboard:

Reusable containers and cutlery

Small plastic bags

Thermos

Cloth or paper napkins

Lunch boxes or cloth bags

Helpful hint: Set aside time in the evening to pack lunches and snacks. You'll be happy you did during the next day's busy morning rush!

7. How do I know how much food to give my child for lunch?

Use [Canada's Food Guide](#) to figure out how many servings are recommended from each food group for your child. Then take that number and divide it by three (ie: 3 meals).

Let's use an eight year old boy as an example:

For his entire day, he would need to eat 5 servings of Vegetables and Fruit, 4 servings of Grain Products, 2 servings of Milk and Alternatives and 1 serving of Meat and Alternatives.

A balanced lunch could then be 1-2 servings of Vegetables and Fruit (1/2 cup of carrots and an apple), 1 serving from the Grain Products (1/2 a pita), 1/2-1 servings of Milk and Alternatives (carton of milk) and 1/2 a serving of Meat and Alternatives (1/4 cup of tuna in pita).

The rest of the servings he needs would be eaten at snacktime and the other two meals at home.

Every child has different energy needs, which can change from day to day and over time. Some schools send uneaten food home so parents will know how much their child has eaten, which can be helpful. Involve your child in planning lunches so that they can help you figure out how much food they need.

During growth spurts, a time when your child is growing very quickly, he or she may feel hungrier and want more to eat. It's a good idea to send 'extra' snack foods that won't spoil (such as an apple, whole grain crackers or almonds) for your child to munch if hungry, or save for another day.

8. How do I make sure my child's lunch and snacks are safe to eat?

Keep these food safety tips in mind when packing your child's school lunch and snacks.

As with any meal, always wash your hands first.

Prepare your child's lunch on a clean surface using clean utensils.

Wash all fruit and vegetables thoroughly (even if labeled "pre-washed") before cutting them or placing them into your child's lunch bag.

Do not reuse perishable foods (meat, fish, poultry and milk products) that come home uneaten from your child's lunch.

Keep lunches in the fridge until your child is leaving for school.

Use an insulated lunch bag with a small ice pack for foods that need to stay cool. A frozen juice box or bottle of water can also help keep foods cold.

Put foods that need to stay hot in a thermos. A thermos is also good for smoothies and milk.

Be sure to keep reusable containers clean by washing well with warm soapy water.

9. What should I know about food allergies and the classroom?

Schools have different policies when it comes to food allergies. Many schools have a nut-free policy throughout the whole school. Or there may be policies just for some classrooms. Find out about the

food allergy policy at your child's school. Once you know about the foods that need to be avoided, keep them in mind when reading the ingredient list on food labels and when packing lunches.

What are some peanut-free lunches?

Leftovers:

Vegetarian chili, small whole wheat roll with slice of hard cheese, fruit cup, water

Curried beef with vegetables, pita wedges, kiwi, mini banana muffin, water

Chicken thigh, whole wheat couscous, raw carrots, wedge of cantaloupe, milk

Fun sandwiches and wraps:

Whole wheat bagel with sliced hard cheese and apples, yogurt, graham crackers, water

Whole wheat hot dog bun, tzatziki as spread, leftover chicken with thinly sliced peppers, an orange, chocolate milk

Leftover stir fry wrapped in a whole wheat tortilla, a nectarine, milk

Tasty tidbits

Cheese and fruit kabob, whole wheat pita wedges, salsa and refried beans for dipping, fortified soy beverage

Pieces of cold cooked meat (ham, beef or chicken), frozen berries mixed into yogurt, bread sticks, water

Chickpeas, tomato and green pepper salad, yogurt, whole wheat crackers with slice of hard cheese, water

10. Where can I find more ideas for healthy lunches?

For more information and ideas on planning healthy lunches, visit:

[Unlock Food's Family Friendly One-Week Sample Menu Plan](#)

Print out a copy of [Unlock Food's](#) or [Health Canada's](#) meal planning checklist.

For more information about food allergies and the classroom, visit [Allergy Safe Communities](#).

11. Resources for the Ministry of Education School Food and Beverage Policy

[What parents need to know about the new school food and beverage policy](#)

[The School Food and Beverage Policy: A new way to look at food and beverages sold in schools](#)

[Healthy lunch ideas for the new school year](#)

[Resources to help understand and use the School Food and Beverage Policy](#)