

# Healthy Packed Lunches for Back to School

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Are you worried about making healthy and delicious packed lunches for kids this school year?



During the school year, many parents will struggle to find healthy foods their children will take to school for lunch. However, shopping smart and trying new ideas can help parents send kids back to school with lunches that are good for them and taste great. Check out the following tips to help make school lunches nutritious and fun.

## Tips for Healthy Packed Lunches:

**Focus on fruits and veggies.** Incorporating fruits and vegetables into lunches can be easy. Packing whole fruits like an apple or a bunch of grapes is easy and delicious. Individual containers of applesauce, pears, peaches, and pineapples also make a tasty treat. Vegetables are another healthy addition to a lunch. Sliced zucchini and cucumbers, red and green pepper strips,



broccoli, carrots, celery, and cauliflower are raw vegetables that are easy to pack. Try adding a low-fat salad dressing or hummus as a dip.

**Spice up fruit.** Spice up fruit by packing dip for them. Low-fat yogurt or pudding is great with strawberries and melons. Try different fruits with different textures so children do not get bored. Intermix crunchy apples with juicy oranges. Making fruit salad is a great way to make fruit fun. Mix together sweet fruits like apples, bananas, and pears with acidic fruits like oranges and pineapples. Kids can try different fruit combinations, and the acidic juices will help prevent the fruit from turning brown.



**Whole grain goodness.** Use whole-wheat bread, whole-grain pasta, and brown rice. Whole-grain cereal is also a fun alternative to potato chips for a snack. If children still want chips, pick ones that are whole grain, baked, or possibly both.



**Food labels are your friend.** When buying canned or individual containers of fruit, make sure it has no added sugar and is packed in its own juice or water.



Read labels to make sure products are made with whole grains. Just because bread is brown doesn't mean its whole grain. Check the ingredients list to make sure the first ingredient is brown rice, bulgur, whole-grain corn, whole wheat, oatmeal, whole oats, whole rye, or wild rice. Also check the Nutrition Facts label for the percent Daily Value (%DV) of fiber because foods with more fiber are more likely to be whole grain.

**Choose 100% juice.** Buy juices with little added sugar or sweeteners. Avoid juices that have sugars or caloric sweeteners listed as their first ingredient. Many juices are only 10 or 20 percent juice and contain a lot of unnecessary sugars. Check juice box labels and try to buy products that are 100 percent juice.



**Calcium counts.** Make lunches healthier by adding low-fat dairy or calcium-rich foods. About 85-90 percent of adult bone mass is acquired by age 18 in girls and 20 in boys. The best ways to get calcium are dairy products such as milk, yogurt, sliced cheese, cottage cheese, and string cheese as well as calcium-fortified foods such as some juices and cereals.



### ***Pack food safety with school lunch.***

- **Packing lunches:** Insulated, soft-sided lunch boxes or bags are best for keeping food cold, but you can also use metal or plastic lunch boxes and paper bags. If using paper bags, create layers by double bagging to insulate the food.
- **Beware of cross-contamination:** This can happen by reusing paper or plastic bags, food wraps and aluminum foil. Have children discard used food packaging and bags after lunch. Throw away perishable leftovers unless they can be safely chilled immediately after lunch and when they are brought home.
- **Keep cold foods cold.** Use an ice pack, gel pack, or freeze a juice box, bottled water or sandwich. For best quality, do not freeze sandwiches with mayonnaise, lettuce, or tomatoes; add them right before eating. Frozen juice boxes, water, and sandwiches will thaw by lunch. *The following should be kept cold:* Meat, fish, poultry, bologna, luncheon meat and hot dogs, milk, soft and hard cheeses, yogurt, cooked vegetables and beans, rice, dressing and gravy, lunch combinations that include luncheon meats with crackers, condiments, and raw fruits and vegetables.

This school year when preparing lunches for kids, remember to focus on variety, check out food labels, and try out different flavors and textures. For more information and resources on food, nutrition, and health topics go to [www.food.unl.edu](http://www.food.unl.edu).

### **Additional Resources & Links:**

- **Cook it Quick: Making you Hungry for Healthy Food.** Packed Lunch Pizzazz. <http://food.unl.edu/web/fnh/packed-lunch>
- **UNL Food Website: Recipe Central.** Enjoy foods from your own kitchen. It's quick, easy, economical, and delicious. <http://food.unl.edu/web/fnh/recipe-central>
- **Nutrition Know How Blog.** Lunch Box Safety. <http://nutritionknowhow.org/wordpress/?p=3364>
- **Nutrition for the School-Aged Child, G1086** Parents can help children entering school make healthy decisions. <http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g1086.pdf>

- **USDA ChooseMyPlate.gov:** Health and Nutrition Information for Children over Five. <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/children-over-five.html>
- **Nutrition Facts: An interactive guide to food labels.** Use this interactive guide to the Nutrition Facts label to help understand what you're eating so you can make healthier choices. <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/nutrition-facts/NU00293/>

### **Sources:**

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2. USDA. Center for Nutrition and Policy and Promotion. (2011). Kid-friendly Veggies and Fruits. DG Tip Sheet No. 11. Accessed at: <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/food-groups/downloads/TenTips/DGTipsheet11KidFriendlyVeggiesAndFruits.pdf>
3. USDA. Center for Nutrition and Policy and Promotion. (2011). Cut Back on your Kid's Sweet Treats. DG Tip Sheet No. 13. Accessed at: <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/food-groups/downloads/TenTips/DGTipsheet13CutBackOnSweetTreats.pdf>
4. U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2012). How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Label. Accessed at: <http://www.fda.gov/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/NFLPM/ucm274593.htm>
5. Patton, P., and Albrecht, J. Food Safety for Families: Pack Food Safety with Your Child's School Lunch. UNL Extension Publication. Accessed at: <http://go.unl.edu/uoi>

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