

What to put in the school lunchbox?

The beginning of the school year is always a good time to re-visit our thoughts about school lunchboxes. Below is a summary of the nutritional needs of school ages children as well as some of the common issues and concerns parents have about this topic. For more information please visit: http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/nutrition_toolkit.html

Five basic nutritional needs

If you have the following five areas of nutrition covered, you can't really go wrong:

1. Protein builds bodies and keeps children strong and healthy. Try peas and beans (any kind, including frozen baby peas and canned baked beans), eggs, fish, chicken, meat, milk, yoghurt and cheese.
2. Vegetables and fruit contain nutrients and fibre important for a healthy body, inside and out. The more colourful, the better. Offer your child broccoli, green beans, carrots, sweet potato, tomatoes, spinach, and cucumber (with skin). Also try colourful fruits such as peaches, apricots, pears and apples. (Wash fruit and leave the skin on.)
3. Starchy carbohydrates provide energy. The more fibre they contain, the slower they burn. Try fibre-enriched bread, wholegrain rice, couscous, pasta, corn bread, pancakes and low-sugar cereal.
4. Good fats with long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids build brain and nerve cells. These good fats are found in fish (tinned or fresh), avocado, and vegetable oils such as those made from olives or canola. Try to avoid deep frying in these delicate unsaturated oils. Read more about good and bad fats.
5. Tap water is the cheapest and best source of fluids. Most tap water is fortified with fluoride for strong teeth.

Foods to avoid

Foods high in salt, sugar or caffeine (found in cola drinks): children's systems can't handle these foods. Also, soft drinks and fruit juice are expensive, high in sugar and bad for teeth.

If you want to offer fruit juice, always mix it half and half with water. Limit daily juice intake to 150 ml for children aged 1-6 years, and 240–360 ml for children 7-18 years.

Fast foods and junk food: these foods include hot chips, potato chips, doughnuts, biscuits and cookies, cakes, chocolate and sugary sweets. They are low in fibre and nutrients and high in sugar and/or fat. The fat in most of these foods is the less-healthy type, including trans fat. Just say 'no' if your child asks for these foods. Instead, let your child get hooked on good snacks, like grated or thinly sliced carrot and sweet baby peas served frozen in a cup.

It's fine to offer dessert at the end of a meal – sliced fruit is the healthiest option. If you want to serve something special, go for vanilla ice-cream or banana bread. Save the seriously sweet stuff, like chocolate, for special occasions like birthdays.

Too much eating or not enough?

You might worry whether your child is eating enough. Or you might be concerned that your child is eating too much and becoming unhealthy.

Appetite

It helps to know that children go through growth and activity spurts that influence their appetites. Sometimes they're really hungry, and sometimes they eat like birds. As long as you offer nutritious food, you can trust your child's appetite to get the balance right. In fact, forcing children to eat (even strongly encouraging them to eat more) can often backfire.

It's also a good idea to limit sweets, chips and biscuits. These can interfere with children's natural appetite for nutritious food.

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