

Healthy lunch boxes for children

Healthy lunches and snacks are important for children and help with concentration and learning. Healthy eating changes are not always easy to make. Try to set a good example with your own lunches. Encourage children to be involved in their own lunch preparation, and their choices about foods to include. Praise your child when they choose healthy foods for the lunch box.

There are limited times for children to eat during the day, especially at school. Children may prefer to play with friends instead of eating. Encourage your child to sit and eat before heading out to play, or talk to your school about making sure all children get a chance to eat enough before play starts.

Six items to put in a lunch box

- Vegetables
- Fresh fruit
- Dairy food – cheese or yoghurt
- Protein food – slice of lean meat, hard-boiled egg or beans
- Starchy food – bread, roll, pita or flat bread, fruit bread or crackers
- Water.

Food suggestions

There are endless food choices available for lunch boxes. It can sometimes be difficult to decide which foods are healthy choices.

Vegetables

Best choices

Try vegetable sticks with dips, or a small container with mixed vegetables such as cherry tomatoes, carrot sticks, celery, corn, beetroot, sprouts, capsicum, snow peas or cucumbers.

Foods best left out

Crisps are best left for parties.

Fruit

Best choices

Fresh, or tinned fruit in natural juice, are everyday foods. Dried fruit is sticky and high in sugar, so eat occasionally or as part of a meal.

Foods best left out

Dried fruit bars and 'straps' are very high in sugar, low in fibre and stick to children's teeth causing tooth decay.

Dairy food

Best choices

- Reduced fat cheese slices or cubes.
- Yoghurt – natural or fruit yoghurt. Try freezing a tub of yoghurt and putting it in your child's lunch box. By lunchtime it will have partially thawed and be ready to eat.

Foods best left out

'Dairy desserts' and flavoured milks are high in sugar.



PLANT
FRUIT & VEG
IN YOUR
LUNCHBOX

Sandwiches

Include a variety of bread and fillings, especially if children begin to lose interest in sandwiches.

Best choices

Choose one or more of the following:

- salmon or tuna in springwater. Try mini cans of tuna with added flavours.
- reduced fat cheese or cheese spread
- egg
- falafel or lentil patties
- sliced lean cold meats such as ham, turkey, chicken, lamb or beef with vegetables
- baked beans or bean salad
- grated carrot, lettuce or tomato.

Include grainy bread or rolls, flat bread, fruit loaf or buns, bagels, corn or rice cakes, Turkish bread, crispbread or pikelets.

As an alternative try:

- pasta – make a salad with lots of raw vegetables
- rice – when making fried rice, minimise oil and add lots of steamed vegetables.

Foods best left out

Avoid chocolate spreads, jam and honey. Avoid fatty meats such as salami and Strasbourg.

Biscuits and dips

Best choices

Wholemeal or multigrain dry biscuits, crispbreads, or rice cakes with yoghurt, hummus or vegetable dips.

Foods best left out

'Oven baked' and plain savoury biscuits are as high in salt and fat as chips.

Muffins and cakes

Try making your own healthy muffins and cakes. Include fruit and vegetables such as sultanas, carrot, zucchini, banana and pumpkin.

Foods best left out

Only offer donuts and cakes occasionally instead of in the lunch box.

Muesli and 'breakfast' bars

Almost all 'bars' are too high in sugar. Some high fibre cereal bars are better than chewy, high fat muesli type bars.

Try to avoid chocolate bars and muesli bars in lunch boxes. These are expensive and stuck together with fats and sugar.

Best drinks

Water and milk are the best drinks for children. They can be frozen to help keep foods in the lunch box cool.

All sweet drinks such as fruit juice, juice drinks, cordials, sports drinks, energy drinks, flavoured milk, flavoured mineral waters and soft drinks are high in sugar and are not necessary. These drinks can increase the risk of tooth decay, are 'filling' and may take the place of healthier foods.

Tips for busy families

Foods should be simple and easy to prepare, 'ready to eat' and appetising after several hours of storage in the lunch box.

Foods such as sandwiches can be prepared the night before or on the weekend, frozen then taken for each day's lunch box. Suitable foods to freeze are: bread, cooked meat, cheese, baked beans or vegemite.

Food safety

In most cases food is stored in your child's lunch box for several hours, so the lunch box needs to be kept cool.

- Choose an insulated lunch box or one with a freezer pack, or include a wrapped frozen water bottle to keep the lunch box cool.
- Perishable foods such as dairy products, eggs and sliced meats should be kept cool, and eaten within about four hours of preparation. Don't pack these foods if just cooked. First cool in the refrigerator overnight.

- If you include left over meals such as meats, pasta and rice dishes, ensure you pack a frozen iceblock into the lunch box.

School canteens

Some schools have a canteen, while others may use a local shop or milk bar to provide lunches for children. Public schools need to meet the Victorian 'Go for your life' Healthy Canteen and Food Services policy, which guides what types of foods are made available to children. Under this food policy healthy (green category) foods are the best everyday food and drink choices and if less healthy foods (amber and red category foods and drinks) are available, it is best to choose these foods only sometimes or occasionally.



**TAP INTO
WATER
EVERYDAY**

Peer pressure

Children are influenced by food advertising, and their friends' food choices.

Remember that not all children go to childcare or school with lunch boxes filled with chips and lollies, despite what children think and say! It is important to keep offering healthy lunch box choices in a variety of ways, as children learn to eat what is familiar to them. Remember that it may take time to change your child's food preferences to more healthy choices.

Severe food allergy

If your child has a severe food allergy it is advised that you develop a management plan with your family doctor, the school or early childhood setting, teacher and class. The plan may include an agreement to limit common food allergens such as nuts, egg or wheat in the lunch boxes of all children (in the childcare or school class). The school or early childhood setting will notify other parents or carers if certain food or items need to be kept away from children and limited in the lunch box.

Important lunch box tips

Best choices

- Vegetables
- Fresh fruit
- Dairy food – cheese or yoghurt
- Protein food – slice of lean meat, hard-boiled egg or beans
- Starchy foods – bread, rice or pasta
- Water.

Foods best left out

- Muesli and chocolate bars
- Potato crisps and oven baked savoury biscuits
- Sweet drinks
- Donuts and cakes
- Lollies, honey and jams
- Fatty meats such as salami and Strasbourg.