

Healthy eating - school lunches

School is the time when children start to enjoy busy social lives, have pocket money and begin to help choose their own lifestyle. Children of this age learn quickly and are also influenced by their friends and popular trends. This is the perfect time to encourage healthy food and activity habits.

Healthy lunch boxes

Healthy lunches and snacks are important for children, and help with concentration and learning. They also set your child up with great eating habits they can use for life. Healthy eating changes are not always easy to make, but they can be done with a bit of forward planning. The beginning of the school year is a great time to start.

Get your child involved in planning for their own lunch box by:

- Either letting them come shopping with you or sitting down together on the weekend to decide on the school lunch shopping list
- If possible, letting your child help out with the lunch preparation. Getting ready the evening before may be a good time.

Your child's age and activity levels influence the amount of food they need each day. Set out clear ideas for a healthy school lunch.

What to put in healthier school lunches

Why don't you try to plan a healthy lunch box to start the school year? Talk to your children and discuss what they would be happy to have included.

Six items to put in a lunch box:

- Fresh fruit
- Crunchy vegetables
- A dairy food – cheese, milk or yoghurt
- A protein food – slice of lean meat, hard boiled egg or peanut butter
- A starchy food – bread, roll, flat bread, fruit bread or crackers. Grainy or wholemeal are best.
- Water.

Six items to avoid:

- Dried fruit bars and 'straps' as they are very high in sugar, low in fibre and stick to children's teeth, causing tooth decay
- 'Dairy desserts' and flavoured milks are high in sugar
- Chocolate spreads, jams and honey in sandwiches. Also stay away from fatty meats such as salami and Strasbourg
- 'Oven-baked' savoury biscuits are just as high in salt and fat as crisps
- Chocolate bars and muesli bars. These are expensive and stuck together with fats and sugar
- All sweet drinks such as fruit juices, juice drinks, cordials, sports drinks, flavoured mineral waters and soft drinks. They are high in sugar and not necessary.

Some tips for prep to year 2 children:

- Cut up large pieces of fruit and put them in a container – this makes it easier to eat, especially if your child has wobbly teeth or if they have less time to eat than they are used to. Send a damp face washer to help with extra juicy fruit.
- Consider giving half a sandwich or roll for morning recess, as this is an easy way to get a healthy fill.
- In the hot weather, send frozen milk, yoghurt or water, or even frozen orange segments. This makes a great refreshing snack as well as helping to keep the lunch box cool.
- Go for colour and crunch in the lunch box by using a variety of colourful vegetables and fruit

School lunches and food safety

In most cases, food is stored in lunch boxes for several hours, so the lunch box needs to be kept cool. A few tips include:

- Choose an insulated lunch box or one with a freezer pack, or include a wrapped frozen water bottle to keep the lunch box cool. Two smaller boxes may be more convenient than a single large one.
- 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, make sure you pack a frozen iceblock in the lunch box.

For more information about food safety see: [Get serious about food safety.](#)

More ideas to help plan healthy school lunches

There are many websites where you can find ideas for a healthy and interesting school lunch, these are just a few:

- [Lunch boxes - healthy ideas for school lunches.](#)
- [Lunch box recipes from Better Health Channel.](#)
- [Nutrition Australia - packing a school lunchbox video.](#)

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