

## Building a Healthy Lunch

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

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 are greater.

**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](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php) to review the food groups: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php)

**Step two:** Think outside the sandwich! Get creative when choosing items for your child's lunch.

### How can I introduce some new lunch ideas?

Your child's taste may change from day to day. 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, colors and textures. For example, you can:

- 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 different types 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 the cheese and shape the shreds 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 quacamole as healthy dips.

## Fun sandwiches and wrap ideas:

- 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

## Involving your 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.

## Foods to keep on hand for preparing healthy lunches

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: (make this the same font/colour as "in the fridge")

- 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!

## 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. Take that number and divide it by three (i.e.: 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 snack time and during the other two meals at home.

Every child has different energy needs, which can change from day to day and over time. Involve your child in planning lunches so that he or she 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.

*Adapted from Ontario Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education*