

The Do's and Don'ts of Back to School Lunch Boxes

Make the back to school grind a little easier with healthy lunchbox advice, tips and ideas from Caroline O'Donovan, Nutritionist with the National Dairy Council.

Good nutrition is not only essential for your child's growth and development but is also important in keeping them adequately fuelled for the long school day. Whether starting school for the first time, progressing from primary to secondary school or returning to a familiar routine; this transition is a busy time of year for kids, teens and parents alike. Back to school marks a fresh beginning and structure for the next 9 or 10 months of your family's year, so take this time as an opportunity to encourage healthy lifestyle routines and habits from the get-go.

Don't forget that a school lunch is one of your child's three meals a day, so it's important to ensure they are getting nutritionally balanced lunches and snacks. Typically, a packed school lunch should contain all of the major food groups; consider:

1. 1 portion of starchy carbohydrate (e.g. wholegrain breads, pittas and wraps, brown rice/pasta)
2. 1 portion of meat or meat alternative (e.g. chicken, fish, egg, pulses)
3. 1 portion of dairy (e.g. yogurt, cheese)
4. 1(+) portion of vegetable (e.g. carrot sticks, peppers, sweetcorn, lettuce, onion)
5. 1(+) portion of fruit (e.g. apple, orange, banana, pear, kiwi)
6. A drink of water and/or milk

The Do's and Don'ts

Do:

- ✓ **Get the kids involved** – learning about food and nutrition are important life skills and should be encouraged from an early age. Children are more likely to be interested in their lunches if they have helped to choose and prepare them. Don't be afraid to let them experiment!
- ✓ **Try new foods** – trying new foods from an early age plays a huge role in a child's willingness and acceptance of different foods. Children's food preferences evolve as their palates mature, so continuously encouraging them to try new and different foods is a crucial step in their development of good eating habits.
- ✓ **Shake things up** – variety is key, not only does variation in the diet provide nutritional benefits, but reduces boredom and lack of interest in food. This is particularly important for children and teenagers, as they can be prone to becoming fussy eaters.
- ✓ **Tailor lunches to the time of year** – for example, a flask of soup with brown bread during the cold, winter months or pasta salad during spring and summer.
- ✓ **Make it look appetising** – it is worth spending that extra few minutes on presentation, especially for younger children. Aim for a variety of shapes, colours and textures in the lunchbox. The more pleasing a packed lunch looks; the more likely kids are to eat and enjoy it. It may be worth investing in colourful, easy-open Tupperware, lunchboxes and thermos flasks to liven up the school lunchtime.
- ✓ **Be prepared and organised** – preparation in advance will not only save you time, but will reduce the chances of opting for last minute ready-made lunches or convenience foods which can be high in sugar, fat and salt.

Don't:

- × **Don't leave it to the last minute** – lack of time may increase the chance of filling lunchboxes with unhealthy, convenience foods.
- × **Don't repeat the same lunches over and over** – while it's a good idea to establish a number of reliable lunches that work, try not to overdo it. Mixing it up will increase the variety of nutrients provided.
- × **Don't forget about portion size** – this should be specifically tailored to your child/teens age, size and activity levels. Younger children will generally need smaller portions than older or more active children.
- × **Don't forget about hydration** – research suggests dehydration can lead to reduced concentration and performance in children. Water and milk are two excellent tooth-friendly choices; try to avoid sugary drinks.
- × **Don't forget about breakfast** – it's no myth that 'breakfast is the most important meal of the day'. Break the overnight fast and set the school goers up with a bowl of milky porridge or mixed berries with yogurt and granola. It can be a long wait until small break, so opt for a breakfast that will fill and fuel!

Did you know?

The Department of Health's Healthy Eating Guidelines recommend 3 servings from the 'milk, yogurt and cheese' food group each day as part of a healthy, balanced diet. Between the ages of 9-18 years, 5 servings per day are recommended due to the increased calcium requirements at this life stage. Examples of one serving include a 200ml glass of milk, 125ml yogurt and 25g (matchbox size piece) cheddar cheese.

Calcium is recognised for its important role in normal bone growth and development; with childhood and the adolescent years particularly important for forming healthy bones. However, you may not realise that there is more to milk and dairy than calcium, with one glass of milk also providing us with protein, potassium, phosphorus, iodine, vitamin B2 and vitamin B12 - each playing a variety of important roles for our health.

Why not check if your child's school is registered with the School Milk Scheme? This is a convenient and affordable way to help your child meet their recommended intake from the 'milk, yogurt and cheese' food group.

Lunchbox ideas

Sandwich fillers:

- Avocado, crunchy peppers and cheddar
- Tuna and sweetcorn, spinach leaves and mayonnaise
- Chicken, mixed salad and tomato relish
- Turkey, grated cheddar and tomato

Sandwich alternatives:

- Pesto pasta salad with chicken and peppers
- Mild spiced couscous with roasted veg and chickpeas
- Brown rice salad with sliced hardboiled egg, avocado and spring onion
- Homemade soup and brown bread

Snacks:

- Carrot and red pepper sticks with hummus
- Cubed cheddar cheese with grapes
- Fruit salad with yogurt and seeds
- Fresh fruit smoothie made with milk or yogurt

Alternative Sweet Treats:

- Homemade flapjacks
- Homemade banana bread
- Mixed unsalted nuts
- Mini box of raisins
- 2-3 dried apricots

The National Dairy Council has produced 'Nutrition & You' booklets for Children and Teenagers, which are endorsed by the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute (INDI). These booklets provide tailored information across a variety of topics such as: healthy eating; keeping active; body weight; lunchbox tips; bone and dental health. These are available download for free at www.ndc.ie/publications

The NDC has also developed educational initiatives to help primary school children and teenagers learn about healthy eating, keeping active and the nutritional importance of dairy foods – ask about the Moo Crew for primary schools (www.moocrew.ie); and the HealthFest event for secondary schools (<http://www.ndc.ie/healthfest>).