Are you packing a healthy lunch?

school food

Getting the balance right

A packed lunch can make a valuable contribution to your child's diet and future health. It is important to include a balanced variety of foods so that your child can get all the nutrients they need.

Recent surveys looking at children's lunchboxes found that they were too high in fat (especially saturated fat), salt and sugar, and just under half of lunchboxes contained no fruit. This leaflet provides practical tips for you and your child on how to prepare a healthier lunchbox.

The Eatwell Guide opposite shows the different types of food we eat and the proportions we should aim for to achieve a healthy balanced diet.

Foods and drinks high in fat, salt or sugar are not needed in the lunchbox. If included, have less often and in small amounts. Remember to cut down all fats and choose lower fat spreads, cheese and leaner meats in your sandwiches. The table below shows the main contributors.

	Fat	Salt	Sugar
Butter/spreads	✔		
Crisps	✔	✔	
Cheese	✔		
Biscuits	✔		✔
Chocolate bars	✔		✔
Processed meats, eg ham		✔	
Fizzy drinks			✔
Ready to drink juice drinks			✔

Eatwell Guide

Use the Eatwell Guide to help you get a balance of healthier and more sustainable food. It shows how much of what you eat overall should come from each food group.

Check the label on packaged foods

Each serving (150g) contains

Energy	Fat	Saturates	Sugars	Salt
1046kJ 250kcal	3.0g	1.3g	34g	0.9g
	LOW	LOW	HIGH	MED
13%	4%	7%	38%	15%

of an adult's reference intake

Typical values (as sold) per 100g: 697kJ/ 167kcal

Choose foods lower in fat, salt and sugars

Eat at least 5 portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables every day

Fruit and vegetables

Raisins

Chopped tomatoes

Frozen peas

Choose wholegrain or higher fibre versions with less added fat, salt and sugar

Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates

Potatoes

Whole grain cereal

Cous Cous

Porridge

Whole wheat pasta

Bagels

Rice

Spaghetti

Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins

Lentils

Beans lower salt and sugar

Tuna

Lean mince

Plain nuts

Chick peas

Eat more beans and pulses, 2 portions of sustainably sourced fish per week, one of which is oily. Eat less red and processed meat

Dairy and alternatives

Low fat soft cheese

Semi skimmed milk

Soya drink

Plain low fat yoghurt

Choose lower fat and lower sugar options

6-8 a day

Water, lower fat milk, sugar-free drinks including tea and coffee all count.

Limit fruit juice and/or smoothies to a total of 150ml a day.

Oil & spreads

Veg Oil

Lower fat spread

Choose unsaturated oils and use in small amounts

Sauce

Crisps

Eat less often and in small amounts

Per day 2000kcal 2500kcal = ALL FOOD + ALL DRINKS

Source: Public Health England in association with the Welsh government, Food Standards Scotland and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland

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Tired of packing the same old lunch? Try these ideas to add variety

- Use different types of bread, such as pitta bread, bagels, wholemeal rolls, wraps or crusty rolls.
- Cook extra pasta or couscous in the evening and include it as an alternative to bread.
- Theme your lunchbox on a different country, eg Italy – add a pizza slice, Mexico – fill flour tortillas.
- Home-made soup (in a thermos flask) is great for cold days, while raw vegetables and salads are light and refreshing for warmer weather. Both are packed with essential vitamins and minerals.
- Get your child excited about packed lunches. Let them help choose their lunch. Pick a colourful lunchbox or let them decorate one with stickers.

Children often need to see and taste new foods several times before they accept them, so try out new ideas at teatime or the weekend before including them in a lunchbox.

What to pack in a healthy lunchbox

Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates

Starchy foods will help your child feel satisfied, as well as being a good source of energy and B vitamins. Choose wholegrain or higher fibre versions with less added fat, salt and sugar. Why not try some of these suggestions?

- 2 slices of bread
- 2 small bread rolls
- 1 tortilla wrap
- 1 or 2 mini pitta breads
- 1 scone or currant bun
- 1 bagel
- ½ a soda or wheaten farl
- 2 tablespoons of cooked rice, pasta or couscous
- a slice of deep pan pizza - choose one with a vegetable or fruit topping, such as pineapple, sweetcorn or peppers

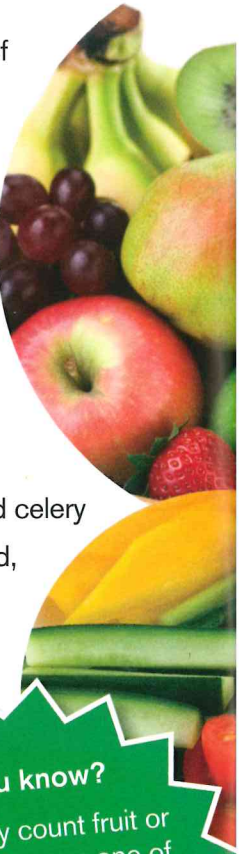
Did you know?

If your child doesn't like wholegrain bread, try the new breads made with half white and half wholemeal flour to boost their fibre intake.

Fruit and vegetables

Help your child get their five a day by putting two portions of fruit and vegetables in their lunchbox (ideally one fruit and one vegetable). A portion could be:

- 1 medium sized piece of fruit, eg apple, orange, banana, pear
- 2 small fruits, eg kiwi fruits, satsumas, plums
- 1 cup of grapes, cherries or berries
- 1 large slice of pineapple or melon
- 1 heaped tablespoon of dried fruit, eg raisins, or 3 dried apricots (this should be part of lunch rather than a snack because of its high natural sugar content)
- 1 cereal bowl of salad, eg lettuce, tomatoes, cucumber and celery
- 3 heaped tablespoons of fresh or frozen veg, eg chopped, sliced or grated carrots, peppers, or sweetcorn
- 150ml of pure unsweetened fruit juice or fruit smoothie
- 3 heaped tablespoons of fruit salad (fresh or tinned in fruit juice) or stewed fruit.



For younger children (4–6 years), reduce these portion sizes by about half, then increase the amount as they grow. Older primary school children should be eating full portions. To reduce the risk of choking in young children under the age of five years, smaller fruits and vegetables like grapes and cherry tomatoes should be halved by cutting lengthways.

Visit www.nhs.uk/Livewell/5ADAY/Pages/5ADAYhome.aspx for more information.

Did you know?

You can only count fruit or vegetable juices as one of your fruit and veg portions. Remember fruit juice and/or smoothies should be limited to no more than 150ml per day in total.

Remove

this middle section from the staples
and display as a reminder
for lunchbox ideas!

Lunchbox

Lunchbox 1

Bagel with tuna, sweetcorn and low fat mayo

Water

Fresh fruit chopped into yogurt

Lunchbox 2

Soda bread pizza with tomato and cheese

Vegetable sticks with hummus

Fruit smoothie

Lunchbox 3

Roast beef, lettuce, tomato roll

Fruit salad

Yogurt

Water

Lunchbox 4

Rice salad with salmon and vegetables

Milk

Handful of raisins

Kiwi fruit

Lunchbox 5

Crackers and cheese

Slice of plain cake

Cherry tomatoes

Carton of unsweetened fruit juice

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Lunchbox 6

Ham salad pitta bread

Banana

Yogurt

Water

Lunchbox 7

Chicken, lettuce, tomato, onion and low fat mayo wrap

Water

Pot of custard and grapes

Lunchbox 8

Egg and onion sandwich

Carrot sticks

Fruit pot

Milk

Lunchbox 9

Vegetable soup and wheaten bread

Apple

Milk

Lunchbox 10

Ham and vegetable pasta

Grapes

Yogurt

Fruit smoothie

For more ideas, check out:

www.safefood.eu

www.nidirect.gov.uk/lunchboxes

www.enjoyhealthyeating.info

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Dairy and alternatives

Make sure your child is getting enough calcium by putting one of these in their lunchbox:

- a container/mini-carton of milk (200ml)
- a pot of yogurt, custard or rice pudding
- a matchbox-sized piece of cheese such as cheddar, edam or gouda varieties
- 2 triangles of spreadable cheese

Children over two years of age can have lower fat dairy products if they are eating well. Milk can be plain or flavoured. Flavoured milks are a good source of calcium but have more added sugar than plain milk. Compare brands by checking the nutrition labels, and only offer these at mealtimes.

Did you know?

Lower fat milk, cheese and yogurt still has the same amount of calcium as full fat versions, which supports growing bones and teeth.

Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins

Protein is important to help your child grow, so include one of the following in your child's lunchbox:

- 2 slices of cooked meat
- 2 slices of chicken or turkey breast
- 1–2 eggs (hard-boiled, sliced or mashed)
- half a small can of tuna, salmon, mackerel or sardines
- 2 tablespoons of chickpea spread, eg hummus – try it as a dip with carrots/celery

Try to include a portion of fish at least once a week. Remember to remove any bones and choose tinned fish in spring water rather than in brine or oil.

Did you know?

Sliced processed meats are higher in salt than meat you have cooked yourself. Why not use leftovers from dinner the night before?

Nuts and other food allergies

Nuts and nut products are suitable for most people; however, a child who has a nut allergy can be affected even if there are nuts in someone else's lunchbox. Many schools have a 'no nuts' policy but there may also be children in the school with allergies to other foods. Your school will be able to provide advice on what foods should be avoided.

You can find out more about food allergies at www.safefood.eu/Food-Safety/Food-Allergies/Individual-food-allergies.aspx

Healthier treats

Many schools are now developing healthy eating policies and are encouraging children and parents not to bring sweets, chocolate, crisps and fizzy drinks for break or lunch. Below is a list of healthier options that can be provided in your children's lunchbox as a treat.

Remember

Healthier treats may still contain sugar, so these should only be eaten at mealtimes when they are less damaging to teeth.

- Fruit loaf
- Mini fruit muffin
- A plain bun or slice of cake
- A slice of carrot cake or banana bread
- Sugar-free jelly pots or fruit jelly
- Yogurts or pots of custard or rice pudding

Thirst quenchers

It is important that children drink enough during the day, so that they don't become dehydrated and tired. Drinks should always be included for break time and lunch. Water and milk are the most suitable drinks for children. Regularly drinking fizzy drinks, squashes (even the sugar-free ones) and fruit juices can erode the surface of the teeth.

Did you know?

If you put fruit juice in your child's lunchbox, give them a straw, as drinking through a straw can help prevent dental erosion.

Top tips

Help keep lunches cool and safe by following these tips.

- Sandwiches containing meat or other foods that need to be refrigerated should be kept as cold as possible until lunch.
- Use an insulated box or bag to help keep lunches cool. Put in a small ice pack or alternatively include a frozen fruit juice carton or bottle of water (fill one third full, freeze and then top up with water). You can even freeze yogurt – this works especially well with tubes and pouches.
- To keep the cold air in, minimise the number of times your child needs to open the lunchbox. Pack things that don't need to be kept cold separately.
- It's important lunches are not kept in a warm place, such as near radiators or in direct sunlight – ask your child's teacher if there's a suitable place for lunches to be stored.
- Pop in a piece of kitchen roll for wiping sticky fingers or mopping up spills.
- Always remember to wash your hands before preparing food and remind your child to wash theirs before eating.

HSC Public Health Agency

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Department of Education
www.education-ni.gov.uk

school food

Public Health Agency
12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).
www.publichealth.hscni.net

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