



School Lunch

Information for Parents

When children eat school lunch, they are more likely to consume milk, meats, grains and vegetables compared to students who don't, including students who bring lunch from home. They also have higher nutrient intakes, both at lunch and over the course of an entire dayⁱ — and, cost-wise, school lunch is a great value.

School Lunch: A Nutritious Choice

School lunches are nutritious! In order to qualify as a federally reimbursable school lunch, meals must meet specific guidelines. School lunches must:

- Provide a variety of foods from [MyPlate](#) and meet one-third of children's daily calorie needs
- Provide one-third of children's daily needs for "problem nutrients" — protein, vitamins A and C, iron and calcium
- Limit the amount of fat to 30 percent or less of calories and saturated fat to 10 percent of calories when averaged over the course of a week
- Offer a variety of milk options, including fat-free, low-fat and reduced-fat milk. Schools can also offer flavored milk and lactose-reduced milk.

School Lunch and Nutrient-Rich Foods

Visit your child's school cafeteria and you're likely to find items like whole-wheat, reduced-fat cheese pizza; a variety of fruits and vegetables; fat-free flavored milk and low-fat yogurt. The [2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans \(DGA\)](#) call for increased consumption of nutrient-dense foods from all the food groups — nutrients that fall short in most Americans' diets. Today's school lunches encourage children to consume fewer empty calories (including sugar-sweetened beverages) and fewer foods high in saturated fats and sodium, by offering a variety of fresh fruits, whole grains, vegetables and lower-fat milk choices.

Milk: The Lunch Beverage of Choice

Encourage your children to choose milk with their lunch. Research shows that children who go for a container of milk at lunch are more likely to get the calcium they need than children who drink other beverages, such as juice drinks.ⁱⁱ Studies also show that:

- Lunchtime milk drinkers take in more of the nutrients that are typically low in children's diets, such as vitamin A and zinc.ⁱⁱⁱ

- Having the choice of flavored milk at lunch can help children meet their calcium needs. Children prefer flavored milk and drink more milk when it's flavored — and flavored milk provides the same amount of calcium and eight other essential nutrients as white milk.

Learn why [flavored milk](#) is a nutritious choice.

Recess Before Lunch

Kids want and need to play, and they need to eat! Recess before lunch allows children to have adequate time for both and can make a big difference in lots of ways. A 1995 ground-breaking study^{iv} showed that when kids have recess before lunch, there are some impressive benefits, including:

- Less wasted food and milk — Children get more nutrients and are less hungry when they return to class.
- Better lunchroom behavior — Students have the time and opportunity to enjoy their meal without feeling the need to rush out and play. Having used excess energy, they are more relaxed, quieter and ready to eat.
- Improved classroom performance — Students are calmer, more settled and ready to learn.
- Improved afternoon classroom behavior — Teachers have more uninterrupted teaching time after lunch.

Talk about the benefits of scheduling recess before lunch with your school principal.

Pack Plenty of Good Nutrition in Lunches from Home

Make good nutrition a priority and involve your children in planning lunches from home. Their "buy-in" makes it less likely foods will be traded, go in the garbage or come home uneaten.

- **Let the Food Groups Be the Guide.** As a rule of thumb, make sure lunches include at least three of the [MyPlate food groups](#). Pack whole, fresh foods instead of processed foods — for example, fresh fruit instead of fruit snacks.
- **Have Children Buy Milk.** Send money to school for children to purchase milk with their lunch instead packing a fruit juice, fruit drink or soft drink. Research shows that children who drink milk with lunch are more likely to meet their daily calcium needs.
- **Let Children Choose Flavored Milk.** Flavored milk has the same nutrients as white milk. Research shows that children who drink flavored milk don't consume more fat or sugar than children who drink only white milk.
- **Serve the Same Foods with a New Twist.** Cut cheese into cubes instead of slices or cut apples into circles instead of wedges.
- **Consider Likes and Dislikes.** Have your children help you create a list of foods they like for lunch. Take them to the grocery store and ask for lunch box suggestions.
- **Keep Foods Safe.** Use an insulated lunch box that includes an ice pack.

Lunch Box Ideas

Packing different lunches keeps kids from getting bored and helps ensure they get the variety of foods needed for a nutritious diet. Here are a few ideas to help you "think outside of the lunchbox."

Use different breads or cut them into different shapes

- Wrap a salad or lean meat and cheese in a tortilla or mountain bread.
- Roll a tortilla spread with hummus and grated carrots or refried beans mixed with cheese.
- Make tuna and cheese subs instead of a traditional sandwich.
- Stuff mini-pita pockets with different sandwich fillings.
- Sprinkle cheese in a pita spread with pizza sauce.

Serve a salad instead of a sandwich

- Toss leftover pasta with veggies and dressing.
- Serve a "salad in a bag" with shredded cheese and low-fat dressing on the side.

Pair vegetables, grains and protein-rich foods

- Cut fresh vegetables, cheese cubes and whole-grain crackers
- Hummus with pita wedges and vegetables for dipping
- Hard-cooked egg and whole-grain roll

Serve leftovers – Many leftovers taste great served cold!

- Cold spaghetti
- Chicken pieces
- Baked ziti or other casseroles
- Pizza slices

Send soup or chili in a thermos

- Add a small bag of shredded cheese to sprinkle on top.

Make it yogurt

- Yogurt in a tube or drinkable yogurt with a muffin and fruit
- A carton of yogurt with low-fat granola and fruit to mix in
- A smoothie in a thermos along with a banana and graham crackers

ⁱ USDA Food and Nutrition Service. [Diet Quality of American School Children by National School Lunch Program Participation Status: Data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2005-2010](https://www.fns.usda.gov/diet-quality-american-school-children-national-school-lunch-program-participation-status-data). 2015. Accessed at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/diet-quality-american-school-children-national-school-lunch-program-participation-status-data> February 20, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Johnson, RK, et al. [The nutritional consequences of flavored-milk consumption by school-aged children and adolescents in the United States](#). *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 2002. 102:853-56.

ⁱⁱⁱ Johnson, RK, et al. The Association between Noon Beverage Consumption and the Diet Quality of School-Age Children. *Journal of Child Nutrition and Management*, 1998. 2:95-100.

^{iv} Gettlinger, MJ, et al. [Food Waste is Reduced when Elementary-School Children Have Recess before Lunch](#). *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 1996. 9:906-8. Accessed at: [http://jandonline.org/article/S0002-8223\(96\)00245-3/abstract](http://jandonline.org/article/S0002-8223(96)00245-3/abstract) February 20 2018.