



# HEALTHY PACKED LUNCHES

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS





# INTRODUCTION

Schools play a crucial role in shaping the health and well-being of our children, making a significant contribution towards their overall development. The eating habits and behaviours that children adopt during their early years have a profound impact on their health, both in the short term and in the long run. It is a growing concern nationally that many children are consuming excessive amounts of fat, sugar, and salt, while lacking sufficient intake of fibre, fruits, and vegetables. To address this issue, Government School Food Standards have been implemented since 2015, ensuring that school meals meet the criteria for being healthy and nutritious. These standards prioritise the provision of balanced meals to children, promoting their well-being and fostering healthy eating habits.

It is essential to include one or more portions of fruits and vegetables in daily intake. There is also a strong emphasis on incorporating wholegrain foods instead of refined carbohydrates, such as opting for brown bread over white bread. While incorporating these changes, it is recommended to limit the consumption of pastry products to no more than two portions per week. Drinking water should also be made readily available. Regrettably, there are currently no set standards for packed lunches brought from home.

A 2020 survey revealed that only 1 in 100 packed lunches met the School Food Standards. Alarmingly, 82% of these lunches contained unhealthy snacks like chocolate or sweets, 61% contained sugar-sweetened drinks such as fizzy drinks or milkshakes, and 60% contained savory snacks high in fat and salt, like crisps.

Packed lunches can contribute to almost a third of a child's weekly food intake. Therefore, we want to work to encourage parents to provide healthy packed lunches for their children. To assist with this, we have put together some helpful guidelines to help you create a nutritious and balanced packed lunch for your child, giving them the best chance for optimal health.



# What are the advantages?



The advantages of a nutritious packed lunch are huge. Firstly, it promotes a healthier diet for your child and to help them adopt lifelong good eating habits. Secondly, it can improve their concentration and energy levels throughout the day.

Additionally, it contributes to better oral health and helps maintain a healthy weight. Moreover, a well-balanced packed lunch provides an excellent opportunity to ensure your child gets their recommended 5-a-day servings of fruits and vegetables. Furthermore, by preparing their lunch, you have full control over the ingredients and portion sizes, allowing you to monitor their food intake.

Not only does this reduce food waste, but it also enables you to utilize leftovers from home to create a wholesome lunch.

Lastly, if your child brings a diverse and nutritious lunchbox to school, it can inspire others to try new foods.



**SAVE YOURSELF**



**TIME AND MONEY**

# SAVE TIME



- Prepare your packed lunch the night before to eliminate added stress from your morning routine.
- Dedicate some time on the weekend to meal preparation.
- You can even freeze individual portions and thaw them overnight.
- Plan lunches for the entire week to ensure a variety of nutritious foods. This not only saves time but also money.
- Involve your children in the lunch-making process. Not only will an extra pair of hands be helpful in the kitchen, but it may also encourage them to eat their lunch.
- Utilize leftovers for lunch.
- If you're cooking pasta for dinner, make a little extra and set it aside for lunchboxes.
- Reheat and store in a vacuum flask or serve cold.

Note: Remember to consume the leftovers within two days.



# SAVE MONEY

- Shop at quality, low-cost food stores to potentially save over 30% on your grocery bill.
- Opt for own-brand items instead of branded products. For example, Aldi's Wholemeal Loaf costs 45p, while Kingsmill's Wholemeal Loaf costs £1.30 (as of Feb '24).
- Cut your own fruits and vegetables instead of buying pre-cut versions. Carrots, for instance, can be as inexpensive as 45p per kg compared to carrot batons at £2.83 per kg. (ALDI, Feb '24)
- Avoid purchasing pre-packaged "lunch box" items. Instead, buy a 500g bag of raisins for less than 4p per 14g serving, rather than pre-packed mini boxes that cost over 7p per 14g serving. Similarly, opt for a 20g chunk of cheddar from a block of cheese for as low as 11p, instead of spending 25p on a 20g Cheese String. (ALDI, Feb '24)
- Invest in reusable food containers instead of using cling film, foil, or sandwich bags. Not only will this be more cost-effective in the long run, but it is also better for the environment.
- Similarly, purchase a reusable water bottle instead of disposable cartons, cans, or plastic bottles that end up being thrown away.

# HEALTHY LUNCH MENU IDEAS



TO TRY AT HOME

# THINGS TO INCLUDE

Things to include in a Packed Lunch do not have to be boring or bland! With a little thought and imagination, they can be healthy, tasty and fun too! Incorporating new foods can be beneficial, especially if your child is a bit selective with their choices. Try to base the contents around the main food groups detailed in the Eatwell Guide (next page).

Ensure that your packed lunch includes:

1. A serving of bread (or a similar option), rice, potatoes, or pasta.
2. Ample amounts of fruits and vegetables.
3. A portion of dairy or a calcium-rich substitute.
4. Some protein from beans, pulses, fish, eggs, or meat.
5. A nutritious beverage and/ or water.

- **Bread, Rice, Potatoes, Pasta and other starchy carbohydrates:** These starchy foods are a healthy source of energy. Good choices include rolls, bread, wraps, chapatti, pitta bread, pasta or rice salad. Wholemeal varieties are good options as they contain more fibre than white varieties.
- **Fruit & Vegetables:** Fruit and vegetables provide vitamins, minerals and fibre. Eating these foods keep children healthy and reduces the risk of disease in later life. Lunches should include at least one portion of fruit and one portion of vegetables like carrot sticks, apples, sliced cucumber.
- **Dairy & Alternatives:** These foods provide calcium for healthy bones and teeth. Include one portion at lunch, for example a drink of semi-skimmed or skimmed milk or unsweetened (fortified) soya milk, an individual cheese portion or pot of plain or low sugar yoghurt, or dairy free alternative.
- **Beans, Pulses, Fish, Eggs, Meat:** These foods provide protein for growth. Packed lunches should include one portion of these foods each day. Suggestions include boiled egg, ham, chicken, soya, Quorn, tuna, mackerel, salmon, hummus, chickpeas, lentils or beans.
- **Drinks:** It is important to stay hydrated. The best drinks options are always plain water or milk (semi-skimmed, skimmed or unsweetened (fortified) alternative). Try to avoid fruit juices and fizzy drinks – if necessary, switch to no-added sugar cordial instead or add a slice of orange or lime to add flavour to plain water.

*We have included the "Eatwell guide" on the next page to illustrate the different foods to include and their estimated portions.*



# Eatwell Guide

Check the label on packaged foods

Each serving (150g) contains

Energy 1046kJ 250kcal	Fat 3.0g	Saturated 1.3g	Sugars 34g	Salt 0.9g
	LOW	LOW	HIGH	MILD
13%	4%	7%	33%	15%

of an adult's reference intake  
Typical values (as sold) per 100g: 697kJ/167kcal

Choose foods lower in fat, salt and sugars

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.



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.



Eat less often and in small amounts

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



# SUPER SNACKS

Super Snacks like *Apples and roasted spiced chickpeas*, *a cup of yogurt and blueberries*, *golden raisins and mixed nuts* – these are just a few examples of satisfying snacks that can fill the gap between meals. It's important to remember that snacks should not replace a whole meal, but rather complement it.

To ensure a satisfying snack, a good rule of thumb is to pair a protein-rich food with a carbohydrate-rich food. Adding a healthy fat can also help to curb hunger even more. The number of snacks needed per day may vary depending on the child's age and activity level, but generally one or two snacks are sufficient. Here are some examples of nutritious snacks:

- 62g of nuts and 250g shredded mini whole wheat squares (with no added sugar)
- Apple slices and 125g chickpeas roasted in olive oil and spices
- 62g sunflower seeds or nuts, and 62g dried apricots, cherries, or raisins (with no added sugar)
- Cheese and 250g of grapes
- 125g blueberries or strawberries and 140g of plain Greek yogurt
- Peanut, almond, or sunflower seed butter spread on a small 100% whole-wheat pita
- Carrot sticks or sliced veggies with hummus

**NB:** Ensure to check your school's policy on nuts and other allergens.

SNACK  
TIME

Use the free NHS food scanner app to find healthier alternatives that you can swap



# THE IMPORTANCE OF WATER



Remember to bring a water bottle with you to school so that you can refill it throughout the day. Water is not only the best choice, but it is also necessary for our bodies. It helps replenish the fluids that we lose through everyday activities such as breathing, sweating, and digesting food.

Additionally, water helps regulate our body temperature on hot days and delivers essential nutrients and oxygen to our body cells. Unlike sugary drinks, water is calorie-free, sugar-free, and caffeine-free. If you prefer some flavor, you can also opt for flavored or unsweetened seltzer or fruit-infused waters, which are healthy alternatives. The amount of water needed varies depending on a child's age, size, gender, and activity level.

According to the National Academy of Sciences, children should consume between 6 to 8 glasses of water per day (around 1.2 litres total). Toddlers may require less, while teenage boys may need more. It's important to note that water-rich foods like fruits and vegetables can also contribute to your fluid intake.



## FUN FACT

A trillion tons of water is evaporated every day by the sun!

# PORTION SIZES

The method is straightforward: allocate half of your plate (or lunch box) to vibrant fruits or vegetables (aim for two to three different varieties), one-quarter to whole grains, and the remaining quarter to healthy proteins. A delectable meal that fuels an active, healthy lifestyle is completed with the addition of healthy fats and a small amount of dairy (if desired).

Keep in mind two key points: choices and presentation - Save time by prepping meals in advance - Create super snacks to bridge the gap between meals - Include a refillable water bottle Choices

# PRESENTATION



Slice sandwiches into triangular or smaller square pieces, or employ cookie cutters. Tiny cookie cutters have the ability to metamorphose apples, watermelon, or cantaloupe into succulent heart or star forms.

A vegetable peeler can create graceful ribbons from any sturdy, elongated vegetable. With caution, utilize a knife to carve carrot or bell pepper into slender sticks.

## USEFUL TIPS

- 'Mix and match' sandwiches - if you have a few mouths to feed you could make a few different flavours, divide into two or three and put one of each flavour in each lunchbox.
- Get a few cookie cutters and cut sandwiches into different shapes (freeze the crusts to make breadcrumbs to add to recipes).
- Choose a fun, colourful lunchbox which they will look forward to opening at lunch time.
- Write your child a brief positive note which they can look forward to reading when they open their lunch box.



**LETS TALK ABOUT**



**THE DANGERS OF  
SUGAR**

# SUGAR FREE

We are all aware that consuming excessive amounts of sugar is detrimental to our health. It can contribute to an excessive calorie intake, leading to weight gain. Being overweight increases the risk of various health issues, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancer. Furthermore, sugar negatively impacts our oral health and can cause tooth decay. This not only affects the appearance of our teeth but can also be extremely painful.

If left untreated, decayed teeth may require extraction, which can lead to further health complications. Moreover, consuming too much sugar can have immediate effects on our behavior and concentration levels. However, determining the appropriate amount of sugar to consume is not always easy. It can be challenging to know how much sugar is present in the food and drinks we consume.

To provide some guidance, here are the recommended daily limits of free sugar\* for different age groups. It is important to note that these limits should not be seen as targets to aim for, but rather as the maximum amount of sugar we should consume in a day. Remember, the less sugar, the better!

\*Free sugars are found in foods such as sweets, cakes, biscuits, chocolate, some fizzy drinks and juice drinks.

Age Group	Upper Limit (g)	Upper Limit (sugar cubes)
4 - 6 years	19g	5 cubes
7 - 11 years	24g	6 cubes
11+ years	30g	7 cubes

It is crucial to be mindful of our sugar intake and strive to consume as little as possible. By doing so, we can protect our overall health and well-being.



# Tips for Reduced Sugar

These are our recommendations for minimizing sugar intake:

1. Opt for low sugar fillings in your sandwiches - avoid sweet options like jam, marmalade, or chocolate spread.
2. Say goodbye to fizzy drinks, juice boxes, and milkshakes - surprisingly, these beverages contain high levels of sugar. For instance, a Fudge Brownie Milkshake contains 13.5 teaspoons (54g) of sugar!
3. Limit the consumption of pre-packaged and processed foods - not only are they costly, but they are also harmful to the environment due to their excessive use of single-use plastic. Moreover, they often contain high amounts of sugar.
4. Be cautious with yogurts - some varieties are loaded with sugar, especially the split pot options. Natural yogurt is the best choice, and you can enhance its sweetness by adding fruit pieces.
5. Include a homemade snack - explore recipes for healthy alternatives such as sugar-free flapjacks. By preparing it yourself, you have control over the amount of sugar used.
6. Stock up on nutritious snacks at home - if children become accustomed to low sugar foods as part of their daily routine, it won't feel like a drastic change in their lunchbox. Children also imitate behaviour, so if they witness you, other family members, or friends consuming healthy snacks, they are more likely to desire them as well.

NB: Making drastic changes may be hard, so we encourage you to take it one step at a time. Start by replacing or reducing the amounts of sugar until you are comfortable.



# HEALTHY LUNCH BOX IDEAS

Below is a handy checklist to help you make sure that your child's packed lunch is balanced. You can even get your child involved in preparing and checking off items in the lunchbox against the list. To ensure that your child is getting a variety of nutrients, aim to have foods from the different categories.

## MAINS

### Starchy Carbohydrates

Tortilla roll up/ wrap  
Bread/ Sandwich  
Pita Pockets  
Rice  
Pasta  
Potatoes  
Couscous  
Bagels  
Flat bread  
Chapatti  
Tapioca  
Roti  
Plantain  
Idli  
Injera  
Dosa



### Beans, Pulses and other Proteins

Chicken  
Ham  
Fish  
Turkey  
Mince  
Vegetarian mince  
Tofu  
Lentils/ Daal  
Egg  
Chickpeas  
Beans  
Soya chunks  
Peas  
Quinoa

## SNACKS

### Snacks

Crackers  
Tortilla chips  
Rice cakes  
Natural yogurt  
Cheese  
Popcorn  
Pretzels  
Granola bar  
Fruit bar  
Baked crisps  
Dairy alternative yogurts and cheese

## FRUITS AND VEGGIES



Berries  
Cherries  
Melon  
Mango  
Mandarin  
Oranges  
Grapes  
Guava  
Avocado  
Pineapple  
Breadfruit  
Starfruit  
Pomegranate  
Dates  
Pears  
Plums  
Kiwis  
Nectarines  
Bananas  
Carrots  
Celery sticks  
Sugar snap peas  
Cucumber  
Tomatoes  
Peppers  
Coleslaw  
Salad  
Kale  
Leeks  
Spinach  
Pak choi  
Sweet corn  
Mushrooms  
Aubergines  
Broccoli  
Cauliflower  
Lettuce  
Butternut squash



# STORAGE

The way parents store their child's lunch can be influenced by the provision for storage. The storage method and temperature control of lunch boxes can significantly impact the types of food included.

Some parents may choose to exclude sandwich fillings like egg and cheese due to concerns about potential odor that may be off-putting to their child during lunchtime. According to the Food Standards Agency, if food is carefully prepared on the day it is consumed, there are only a few types of food that may pose a risk of harmful organism growth if not refrigerated until lunchtime.



## Tips for good storage

- Try to use reusable airtight containers or vacuum flasks. This ensures the safety of the food and promotes sustainability.
- Use ice packs or iced drinks to keep foods at a cooler temperature.
- While salt is used as a natural preservative, consider alternative methods that reduce salt intake.



## FUN FACT

You can use culinary herbs and spices for flavour which in turn reduces the need to put salt in your food.



# OTHER HELPFUL LINKS

Healthy lunchbox ideas (Change 4 life)-

<https://www.nhs.uk/change4life/recipes/healthier-lunchboxes>

<https://www.nhs.uk/change4life>

[NHS Eatwell Guide](#)

[School packed lunch inspiration \(BBC Good Food\)](#)

<https://www.bbcgoodfood.com/howto/guide/school-packed-lunch-inspiration>

[Resources to support parental engagement around healthier lunchboxes](#)

<https://www.foodafactoflife.org.uk/whole-school/parental-engagement/#HL>

[Southampton HAF \(Holiday Activity and Food\)](#)

<https://www.southampton.gov.uk/schools-learning/support-inclusion-education/haf/>



