

Make those school lunches more nutritious

December 6 2018, by Len Canter, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—Brown-bag lunches give you control over what you eat and what your children eat, but studies show that these to-go meals need to be healthier. This is especially important for kids because their eating habits are developed during the preschool years.

Recent studies have evaluated lunches for preschoolers by comparing

their contents to the Healthy Eating Index, which is used to assess how well recommended nutrition guidelines are being followed. The conclusion: there's a lot of room for improvement.

Out of a possible 100 points, the lunches scored just 52 based on what kids actually ate (lunches as packed were slightly higher, at 58, based on how healthy they were to begin with). Scores were lowest for vegetables, especially greens, followed by seafood, whole grains and plant proteins. While other [protein foods](#) and fruit were well represented, foods with empty calories took the top spot.

So what can you do?

Start by making small changes to give taste buds time to adjust. Instead of [white bread](#) or rolls, switch to 100 percent whole wheat. Or try a wrap—both you and your kids might find it more fun to eat, and it's easier to sneak in veggies in place of processed cheese slices, for instance.

Next, ditch pre-sliced deli meats in favor of fresh chicken breast or turkey—you can roast your own on Sunday and carve slices for lunches throughout the week. Try mashed avocado to add creaminess in place of mayo. Pre-washed and sliced veggies are a timesaver, but if you're on a tight budget, wash and cut them up yourself in advance. One of the healthiest substitutions is replacing a bag of chips with an ounce of nuts if there aren't any nut allergies.

Also, stock up on essentials like reusable containers and a thermos, great for packing soups and stews, which can also be made in advance. In short order, you'll find that these translate into a money savings compared to the extra cost of buying single-serving packages of snacks and other foods.

And be sure to get kids involved in the menu planning and prep. They'll be more inclined to eat what they help make and pack.

More information: The U.S. National Institute of Health's "We Can!" program has more ideas for [healthy school lunches](#) that kids will enjoy.

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Citation: Make those school lunches more nutritious (2018, December 6) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-12-school-lunches-nutritious.html>

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