

# Tips for healthy school lunches on a budget

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As children head back to school, many parents are seeking cost-effective, healthy lunch options. Courtney Cary, senior registered dietitian in the Department of Medicine-Gastroenterology and Hepatology at Baylor College of Medicine, provides tips for a nutritious

lunch that stays within budget.

## **Focus on nutritional building blocks**

Whether children bring lunch from home or eat lunch from the school cafeteria, Cary recommends that every lunch be built around foods that will provide sustained [energy](#). When money is tight, she suggests concentrating on the basic nutritional building blocks—proteins and carbohydrates.

- High-fiber carbohydrates: whole wheat bread, brown rice, whole wheat pasta, beans and fruit
- Lean proteins: canned chicken and tuna, boiled eggs, lean deli meat or yogurt

"As long as there's a protein and a [carbohydrate](#) in your child's lunch, they will be set up for a successful day," Cary said. "Carbohydrates give us energy, and proteins keep us full."

Sandwiches are a great option for a cost-effective, balanced meal, Cary said. Whole wheat bread provides fiber and sustained energy. Fillings like peanut butter and jelly or turkey provide protein and satiation.

## **Cut costs with healthy canned foods**

Canned food provides the same nutritional value as fresh food, Cary said, and can be a good way to save money. She recommends low-sodium soups and fruits and vegetables canned in water.

"Canned products are picked at peak ripeness and canned immediately, which preserves the nutritional factor," Cary said. "You're not sacrificing vitamins and minerals with canned foods."

## Make every meal a balanced meal

No matter how much you spend on lunch, every meal should be balanced, Cary said, and it's possible to achieve even with picky eaters. For example, Cary recommends adding cottage cheese to mac and cheese to pack in more protein. If your child likes pizza from the school cafeteria, Cary suggests adding a side of yogurt to incorporate [protein](#). Make sure lunch includes a sugar-free drink for [hydration](#) and to avoid a sugar crash in the afternoon.

"All foods belong in our diet, but we need to view them as energy," Cary said. "For lunch, parents should look for foods that provide the most sustained energy to get their kids through the school day."

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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