BACK TO SCHOOL: HEALTHY LUNCH IDEAS

It’s that time of year when summer comes to a close and kids prepare to head back to school. As you get everything in order for a smooth transition into the new school year, don’t forget to focus on your child’s lunch box. Packing a healthy lunch will ensure that your child is getting the vitamins and nutrients he/she needs to sustain them until the bell rings at the end of the day.

BENEFITS OF A HEALTHY BROWN-BAG LUNCH

• **Control.** Planning ahead what your child will eat allows you, as well as your child, to know what nutritious food will be consumed for the day. Getting your child involved in the planning also increases the likelihood that he/she will consume the lunch that was packed.

• **Savings.** Bringing a packed lunch from home can be a cost-efficient alternative to buying a hot lunch from the school cafeteria or making purchases from the vending machine.

• **Variety.** By packing lunch a few times a week, your child can enjoy his/her favorite “home” foods that aren’t available at school (i.e. your homemade chicken noodle soup, hummus and pita bread, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich cut into fun shapes, etc.).

• **Time Saver.** With a little planning ahead, you can pack your child’s lunch the night before and simply grab-and-go in the morning...no fumbling for lunch money or hitting the drive-thru for an easy alternative. It also allows your child more time for eating and socializing, rather than waiting in the lunch line.

LUNCHBOX SAFETY

Along with ensuring your child has a well-balanced lunch, make sure you follow some basic tips for keeping the lunchbox healthy.

• Clean the inside of the lunchbox at least once a week with soap and water or a sanitizing wipe.

• Use an insulated lunch bag and include an ice pack to prevent perishable foods from spoiling.

• Use an insulated thermos for hot foods such as soup or chili.

• Never reuse packaging, such as aluminum foil or plastic bags.

• Throw away uneaten leftovers that are perishable (i.e. produce, deli meat, cheese, etc.). These foods will not be safe to repack.

• Be sure to include some hand sanitizer or a moist towelette. Over half of kids don’t wash their hands before eating lunch.
GET CREATIVE!

It’s easy for kids to get bored if you’re packing the same thing every day. Keep lunch interesting and fun by mixing up what goes in your child’s lunchbox.

1. Small foods are easier for kids to handle and more fun to eat. Instead of packing a full sandwich, use a cookie cutter to cut it into smaller, fun shapes.
2. Make fruit more interesting by creating fruit kabobs. Include strawberries, grapes, pineapple, blueberries and watermelon on a raw spaghetti noodle for a rainbow of color.
3. Jazz up veggies by slicing them and providing a dunkable dip. Try hummus, peanut butter or salsa.
4. Get the kids involved. Take them shopping to pick out the snacks they would like to have. Or have them help make their lunch (i.e. bake treats to include, incorporate their favorite ingredients in a trail mix, etc.).
5. Repurpose dinner. Almost anything you make for dinner can be turned into lunch the next day. Roast chicken or turkey can be used in a quesadilla, pasta can be used in salads, even pancakes can become a sandwich when layered with cream cheese and fruit preserves.
6. DIY sandwich. Unleash your child’s inner architect by packing stackable slices of turkey or ham, cheese and bread or crackers so they can build their own sandwich. Cut the cheese into shapes to add more fun.
7. Captivate with color. Try packing a lunch that uses one color as a theme (i.e. everything is yellow…cheese sandwich, banana or pineapple, yellow Jello and a lemon bar for dessert). Experiment with food coloring to create combinations that will entice.
8. Add life to old favorites. Use different breads to beat sandwich boredom. Consider spreading PB&J in a tortilla and rolling it instead of relying on regular bread. Try a ham or turkey sandwich on a ciabatta roll or bagel. You can also experiment with different condiments and toppings to keep it fresh.
9. Don’t forget the treat! Children love sweets and they can be enjoyed in moderation. A sweet treat with some substance, such as homemade muffins, Rice Krispies treats with peanut butter instead of marshmallow, granola bar, etc.
10. Add a personal touch. Include a handwritten message, riddle, sticker or some other small token. Knowing someone cares is “nourishing” in its own way.