

Food Fact Sheet: Healthy packed lunches

Packed lunches don't have to be boring. With a little thought and imagination they can be fun, healthy and tasty too.

Follow these tips to ensure you have a nutritious and delicious lunch.

Fill up on fibre

Starchy carbohydrates are a really important part of a healthy diet and should make up about a third of the food we eat. They are packed full of nutrients (including B vitamins, iron and fibre) and you should include a little at each meal to keep your energy levels up during the day:

- Try to keep a selection of breads in the freezer for sandwiches and choose wholegrain varieties when you can. Using a different type of bread each day can make sandwiches more interesting. Try multigrain and seed rolls, bagels, bread rolls, baguettes, pitta breads. Use up all the vegetables in the fridge! Vegetable or fruit toppings such as pineapple, sweetcorn or peppers can be added to sandwiches for a special twist.
- Alternatively, cook extra pasta, couscous, rice, quinoa, potatoes or sweet potatoes and mix with cut-up vegetables, a few nuts or tuna, then just add your favourite low-calorie dressing.

Power up with protein

Try to include lean meat, chicken, fish, eggs, nuts, beans or pulses in your lunchbox because they are a great source of protein which is needed for the growth and repair of your body. Try:

- tuna with cucumber, green pepper, sweetcorn or tomato
- choose oily fish such as tinned sardines or mackerel on toast once or twice a week - a great source of [omega-3](#) which may help to keep your heart healthy
- egg mayonnaise and watercress
- cottage cheese and dried apricots
- cooked chicken or turkey, mustard, tomatoes and lettuce
- peanut butter and banana
- chicken breast, cheese and tomato
- for beans and pulses try lentil soup, hummus with red pepper/grated carrot or a mixed bean salad

Remember if you use a fat spread, it's important that you get the portion control right, or use plant-based fats (like avocado lightly mashed with a fork).

Always add fruit and veg

It's important to eat [five \(or more\) portions of fruit and vegetables every day](#) to prevent heart disease and reduce the risk of some types of cancer. Below are some good ideas to get plenty at lunchtime:

- sliced salad vegetables in sandwiches – such as cucumber, tomato or avocado
- chopped raw vegetable crudité's e.g. carrot sticks, cherry tomatoes, or a mixed salad - these can be great for dipping in hummus, low-fat cream cheese or cottage cheese
- fresh fruit e.g. apple, grapes, banana, kiwi fruit
- dried fruits e.g. raisins, apricots
- tinned fruit in natural juice – the cheapest option is to decant into a small container, alternatively buy in small tins with a ring pull

Stay hydrated

It is important to stay hydrated during the day – current recommendations are for women to drink 1.6 litres and men two litres of water (or other fluids) per day (equivalent to eight to ten glasses). When the weather is warm or if you are more active you may need more. Avoid soft and fizzy drinks that are high in added sugars, instead choose from:

- plain water (still or sparkling) is always best
- plain milk (skimmed or semi-skimmed) or plain yoghurt combined with fruit e.g. smoothies, pureed fruit with plain yoghurt
- pure fruit juice in small cartons (150ml) or in a small bottle which will also count towards one of your five-a-day (but it will only ever count as one portion no matter how much you drink)
- low calorie squash or diet drinks - small cans are now available
- don't forget a flask for hot drinks or soup in the winter

Dairy delights

Try to include some dairy products in your lunchbox as calcium is important to keep your teeth healthy and your bones strong. Opt for no added sugar or lower added sugar varieties where possible:

- low fat yoghurt – plain or fruit
- low fat fromage frais
- small pot of rice pudding
- glass of milk – plain or flavoured
- unsweetened yoghurt with fruit for sweetness
- cheese in a sandwich will also count
- if you can't eat dairy – try adding a fortified non-dairy alternative.

Fancy something extra in your lunchbox?

There is nothing wrong with this. Just try and make healthier choices when you can. If you opt for a high sugar, high fat snack then keep it to 100kcal.

Choose more often	Choose less often
A portion of fruit - fresh or dried (a portion is one handful)	Chocolate and sweets
Unsalted nuts	Crisps and salted nuts
Unsweetened yoghurt	Pastries
Dark chocolate - more than 70% cocoa	Cakes/biscuits

Remember to keep your lunch cool and safe

- use a cool bag an ice-pack or freeze a carton of juice and place in with food to keep cool
- keep in the fridge until morning if you make it the night before
- don't store your lunch next to a radiator or in direct sunlight.

Summary

As you can see there are lots of foods that can be used to make a packed lunch varied and tasty. Just remember to include something from each of the four main food groups, as well as a drink, and you'll not only have a meal to look forward to, but a lunchbox packed full of all the right nutrients to fuel your body for the rest of the day.