

The Wellness Family

Dr. Gerken Keeps You Informed

Healthy School Lunches

Parents today recognize the importance of feeding their children healthy nutritious foods. The problem is that the cafeteria has become just another franchise; foods aren't healthy and well-balanced. Vending machines offer chips, cookies, sodas and a myriad of other junk foods that children shouldn't be eating. This creates a challenge to parents that many have decided to ignore.

Assuming that it's a lost cause, some parents have rationalized that the rest of their meals are healthy and nutritious so why worry about what their children are eating for lunch. This is a dangerous misconception considering what is being served in the majority of school cafeterias.

What's being served?

Although programs have begun to appear over the past few years addressing the problem, the fact is that not much has changed. The majority of entrees served on school campuses include pizza, Sloppy Joes, cheeseburgers, spaghetti, hotdogs and corn dogs.

It's rare that you will see anything made with fish and chicken; unless it's fish sticks and chicken nuggets, which contain processed meat that is breaded and deep fried. This is not nutritious.

The Traditional Sandwich

Commonly found in the packed lunch is a sandwich; the problem is that bad choices can be made here as well. White bread bought at the store contains bleached flour. And don't be fooled by the word "enriched", as adding back a portion of the vitamins removed during the bleaching process doesn't undo the damage.

Additional poor sandwich choices include peanut butter which has hydrogenated oil; and as much as parents want to believe differently, jelly is not a source of fruit but is high in processed sugar. Pre-packaged, processed meats and cheeses should also be avoided as they are high in chemicals and salt.

Better sandwich choices include whole wheat bread with a lot of grains, and almond butter instead of peanut butter. Also, be creative. Try to put vegetables into a sandwich as much as possible.

Another great sandwich option is a healthy wrap. This can be done by purchasing whole grain tortillas and wrapping up healthier protein and vegetable sources.

For instance, baked turkey or chicken with lettuce, cucumbers, sprouts, red peppers – maybe even some beans sprinkled inside make a tasty protein.

Perfect Packing

Part of putting together a healthy packed lunch is having the right storage containers. Be sure to use an insulated lunch box that will hold up to four small food containers and a thermos.

When purchasing the containers you should buy at least two sets; this will help you to avoid having to wash them each night. As for the thermos, be sure that it is the wide mouth variety; this will be necessary if you wish to use it for beans or soup.



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The Beverage

When it comes to healthy lunches, milk, juice and soda should be avoided at all cost. The American Academy of Pediatrics says that juice consumption is contributing to cavities and gastrointestinal issues for children.

The best choice is a small bottle of water: open the bottle, remove an extra tablespoon or two of the water to avoid expansion problems when freezing, then put it in the freezer with the lid off. In the morning replace the lid then put it in the lunchbox. This will not only be a healthy beverage at lunch, but will succeed in keeping the other items in the lunch box nice and cold.

The Entrée

Great sources of protein that can be put in a small lunch container are cubes of baked chicken, turkey or ham. This does not include processed meat that you buy at your grocery store; but should be prepared at home and cut into bite sized pieces. Remember that you can freeze these in small portions and use them randomly over several weeks.

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A hard boiled egg is also a great source of protein. And don't forget that wide mouthed thermos you purchased; beans are an excellent source of protein and can be served in a thermos with organic tortilla chips for dipping. You may also consider providing your child with some of last night's stew heated up.

The Side Dishes

Most children don't consider a meal as lunch unless there are chips and cookies though these must be avoided at all cost. The side dishes for your children should be tasty green vegetables; remember that greener is better.

Fruit is also a great side dish, but while it is healthy, it is also a source of sugar and not as rich in vitamins and minerals as vegetables. Serve fruit just once for every five servings of vegetables. Remember that it should be fresh, organically grown fruit; fruit roll-ups are not fruit.

Also consider inviting your child to help you prepare vegetable soup or vegetarian chili. These can be put in a thermos and taken to school over the span of a week.

Consider putting together a grain salad. This can include couscous or steamed long grain brown rice with chopped cucumbers, red peppers, baby carrots, or any other similar vegetable. You may also choose to marinate the chopped vegetables in a salad dressing for a few days prior to preparing the salad. Drain the vegetables and then mix them in. This will add moisture to the salad without having to add excess dressing.

Going Organic

Organically grown foods are slightly more expensive but worth it. The price of providing foods that are free of pesticides, growth hormones, hydrogenated oils and artificial additives and preservatives is high.

It's important to note that organic foods are also more filling. By providing your child with smaller portions of healthier foods you'll be spending the same amount of money without providing them with the cheaper foods. These cheaper foods are not just less expensive, but they lack nutrition. You're paying less but you're getting less in return.

Create a Menu

No one knows better than your own child what they're going to eat, so let them help you prepare their lunches. Remember that if they like what their eating they will bring home an empty lunchbox.

The best way to accomplish this is to insure that their options are only healthy choices but with variety. This can be made easy by creating a mix-and-match menu. Using a white board, poster board or similar display, draw out five columns and label them for each day of the week.

Then using color-coded post-it notes, index cards or by printing on colored paper, create a square for each lunch option. For example, their protein options would be on blue, vegetables would be on green and fruits would be on yellow.

Every Sunday, let your child help you prepare their menu by picking the appropriate cards and placing them in the column for each day. You and your child can then begin prepackaging those options that can be frozen or stored for a few days.

In Summary

It's important that your children like their lunches but it's more important that their bodies get the vitamins, minerals and nutrients they need to develop and grow properly.

Dear Parent,

Dr. Gerken is dedicated to providing you with the absolute best in family wellness care. Take a moment today to discuss with your Family Wellness Chiropractor any concerns you may have regarding your child's diet.

This newsletter is provided to you by:

**The Chiropractic Office of
and Dr. Donald Gerken
at 88 E Bonita Road; Suite E
Chula Vista, CA 91910
619.422.3088**