News Release

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Back to school lunch ideas

It’s back to school time - so what’s for lunch. The National School Lunch Program offers nutritious meals for all children but sometimes your child may not like what they are serving that day. Packing a healthy and safe lunch is your other option.

Use USDA’s MyPlate to help plan nutritious lunches. The five food groups in MyPlate are fruits, vegetables, grains, protein and dairy. Lunches should include at least three of these five food groups.

Fruit is a popular choice for packed lunches. Fresh, dried, or packaged fruits are options to consider. Core an apple and stuff the inside with peanut butter. Top with raisins, nuts, sunflower seeds or toasted coconut. Choose packaged fruits that have no added sugar or packed in their own juice. Freeze fruit cups so they can be used as an ice pack to keep other foods cold.

Variety is key for vegetables — from miniature carrots, slices of red, yellow, and orange pepper to broccoli florets, cherry or grape tomatoes, cucumber or zucchini slices. Let your child help select the veggies from your own backyard garden, local farmer’s market or grocery store. Pack vegetables in small reusable plastic containers and fill another container with low-fat dressing, salsa, hummus or refried bean dip so your child can dip their veggies. Keep them cold with frozen gel packs.

Vary the type of bread you use. Instead of always using plain white, try breads like whole wheat, multigrain, raisin, pita pockets, bagels, rolls, rice cakes and English muffins. Cut the bread into shapes, such as triangles or stars, with cookie cutters to make it more fun.

Protein can come from many different types of food. Popular protein choices are turkey, ham, roast beef, chicken or tuna salad, nuts and peanut butter, cheese sticks with crackers, hard cooked eggs, and hummus. Some protein foods, like peanut butter, are shelf stable so they don’t need to be kept cold. But most
protein foods need to be kept cold. If you are packing sandwiches, make them the night before and freeze them. This keeps them safe and saves time in the morning. Pack them in the lunch box with frozen gel packs to keep them cold. By lunchtime, the sandwich will be thawed and ready to eat. Another alternative is to bag the bread or crackers separate from the meat and cheese and they can make their own sandwich at school.

The most common source of dairy food is milk. Milk can be purchased at school for a very low cost. It doesn’t matter if it’s white or chocolate milk but just remember that chocolate-flavored milk is likely to have more sugar. Other dairy food options are yogurt and cheese.

To keep variety in lunches, make a lunch menu for a week at a time. Review the school menu and decide which days you are planning to pack. Include your child in planning and use different foods each day so your child doesn’t get bored and they get a variety of nutrients. Lunch is an important part of the child’s day at school so make it a healthy one.