

Packing Nutritious School Lunches



Children see one food and for every 5 minutes of cartoons they watch on Saturday mornings. Since few of these ads are for fruits and vegetables and children watch about 20 hours of TV per week, few children get good information about proper nutrition.

As a result, only 1 percent of all children have eating patterns consistent with dietary recommendations, stated the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (ASDA) Food and Nutrition Service. In addition, only 18 percent of girls ages 9-19 get the calcium they need, and 4.7 million youth ages 6-17 are overweight. Forty-five percent of elementary school children eat less than one serving of fruit, 20 percent eat less than one serving of vegetables and 50 percent do not eat the number of servings of grains they need in a day.

WHY PARENTS SHOULD BE CONCERNED

The effects of unhealthy eating on children may include under-nutrition, iron deficiency anemia (due to a lack of iron in the diet) and obesity. Unsafe weight-loss methods, eating disorders, and tooth decay also result from a poor diet.

Diet is a known risk factor for the development of the nation's three leading causes of death: heart disease, cancer and stroke. Other health problems of adulthood associated with a poor diet are diabetes, high blood pressure, being overweight and osteoporosis (a weakening of the bones).

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INCLUDE YOUR CHILDREN

Try the following tips to help your child eat more nutritiously:

Ask your children what they want to eat for lunch. Children tend to eat healthier if they have a say in preparing a meal.

Create a weekly school lunch menu. Being organized helps avoid morning panics caused by not knowing what to pack and ensures you have all the ingredients on hand.

Make a game out of choosing a lunch menu. Create index cards with names of different food groups on one side and pictures of the food groups on the other. Your children can decorate the cards and then choose a card from each group when it's time to plan a lunch.

Take your kids to the grocery store and allow them to choose a fun snack to go along with a sandwich or fruit.

Involve your kids in the lunch-packing process. They will be more inclined to eat it if they help pack it.

Take your children to a farmers market and check out the less well-known fruits and vegetables. Also encourage them to plan and care for a garden.

Pack a surprise in each lunch, such as stickers, or write an encouraging note. This will add an element of fun to a traditional lunch.

FOLLOW FOOD SAFETY

It's also important to keep food safety in mind when packing your child's lunch.

Keep it clean: Wash your hands before preparing a lunch; keep food preparation surfaces, utensils and lunch boxes clean; and thoroughly rinse fresh fruits and vegetables.

Keep it cool: If you are preparing refrigerated items the night before, keep them in the refrigerator and pack them to go in the morning. Include a cold pack or substitute a frozen single-sized juice box that will thaw by lunchtime.

Keep it hot: Use an insulated thermos for items like soup, chili or stew, and keep it tightly sealed.

Keep it fresh: Any perishable food, such as meat, poultry or eggs, should be discarded if proper storage is not available after lunch. ■

Resources

FDA Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition: www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/fttests.html

Kids Health: http://www.kidshealth.org/kids/grow/school_stuff/school_lunches.html

MamasHealth.com: www.mamashealth.com/nutrition/schlunch.asp

USDA Food and Nutrition Service: www.fns.usda.gov

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