Packing safe and appealing school lunches for your kids: NetWellness

Need some ideas on packing school lunches? Packed lunches should have three "ingredients": nutrition, taste and safety.

When considering nutrition:

- Include at least one fruit and one vegetable. For vegetables, try carrot or celery sticks, cherry or grape tomatoes, or bell pepper strips. Or be bold and use sugar snap peas, jicama sticks, or rounds of cucumber or zucchini.
- Include fruits and vegetables your children enjoy. Fresh produce is always a good choice, but also consider small pop-top cans of pineapple, peaches, and other fruits.
- Avoid juice drinks or punch with a lot of added sugar. Look for "100% fruit juice" on labels.
- Avoid prepackaged cheese-and-crackers or similar treats. They are generally high in fat, sodium, and calories. Check the label. Small packs of chips are often better choices, if your child can afford the calories.

Kids also insist that lunches be tasty:
- Vary sandwich breads. Whole-grain bread, kaiser rolls, pita bread, hamburger buns, bagels, or tortillas are good alternatives to plain white bread.
- Wrap tomatoes and lettuce for a sandwich separately so the bread doesn't get soggy.
- Include a favorite pasta salad or hot soup in an insulated wide-mouth container.

For safety's sake, make sure perishable items stay cold until the time your child eats lunch. If the lunch is packed at 7:30 a.m. and lunchtime is at noon, the lunch could sit at room temperature far longer than the two hours food safety specialists recommend.

To reduce risk:

- Use an insulated lunch box or bag and include a frozen gel pack to keep the contents cool.
- Pack a frozen juice box with the lunch. It will thaw by the time lunch rolls around and will keep other items cool.
- Lunch-meat or peanut butter sandwiches can be frozen overnight and should thaw by lunchtime. Freezing tuna salad or other similar spreads isn't a good idea because mayonnaise doesn't freeze well.
- Also, rinse fruits and vegetables before packing the lunch so they don't cross-contaminate other items. And, don't re-use paper bags. Food particles -- and any germs with them -- can't be wiped out. See other safe-lunch tips in "Quick Tips to Packing a Safe Lunch."

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