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Power-Packed Lunches

by Christina C. Gordon, MS, FCS

If breakfast is the most important meal of the day, then lunch is a close second; especially during the school year. Your children have serious jobs to do during the school day, and healthy lunches are vital to their success. Most schools have adjusted their lunches to remove fried and high-fat foods, but if you are a parent that likes to pack your child's lunch, or if your child attends a center without food service, here are some fun, healthy foods that are power-packed:

- **Include lean proteins for extended power during the day.**
 - Low-sodium lunch meats
 - Fajita chicken or beef strips
 - Baked or black beans packed in a thermos
 - Soups with beans, peas, whole-grain pasta in a thermos
 - Nuts or cheese cubes are mini power pellets!
- **Pack crunchy vegetables (kids need at least three servings a day).**
 - "Rulers" made out of strips of celery, carrots, or jicama
 - Bell pepper "belts" in green, red, or yellow
 - "Trees" made with broccoli and cauliflower florets
 - Low-fat dips sometimes help kids try new vegetables
 - Salad with your child's favorite toppings
- **Use a variety of whole grains for exciting choices.**
 - Whole-grain bagels
 - Whole-grain or vegetable-themed tortillas
 - Pitas or flat bread
 - Whole-grain crackers or rice cakes
 - Fun, whole-grain options in bread or buns
- **Add a variety of low-fat dairy.**
 - Low-fat milk (pay attention to the sugar in flavored milks)
 - Low-fat "real" yogurt with fruit (or buy vanilla and add your own fruit)
 - Cheese cubes
 - Cheese slices with 2% milk fat for maximum benefit
- **Pay attention to the sugar in the lunch.**
 - Stay away from sugary soft drinks or fake fruit drinks
 - If you include fruit in the lunch, switch out fruit juice for milk or water
 - Read the labels on those pre-packaged lunch snacks and make the best choice
 - Pack homemade mini-muffins with fruit, nuts or oats for a fun treat

Remember that just because a food is marketed towards children, that does not mean it is the best thing for them. Too much sugar at lunch is the main cause of afternoon drowsiness, so double-check those labels and look for hidden sugar in the nutrition information or in the ingredients.

Some of these items may be more expensive than the less healthy alternatives, so watch for sales, buy fruit and vegetables when they are in season, and think about how much your children will benefit from your healthy choices!

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