

How to pack a healthy lunchbox for children under five

Many children under five eat much of their food each day away from home. They may be at pre-school, at a long day care centre, or in family day care - meaning they're cared for by a licensed carer in a family home. Although some services provide meals, parents often need to send enough food along for the day. Here are some good ideas for providing healthy lunches and snacks.

Include foods that are nutritious, fun and easy to eat.

Young children need a variety of healthy foods to provide them with the different nutrients their growing bodies need. These can include foods traditional to your culture or Australian foods. Any leftovers from dinner are fine, if children enjoy them. Children in care for six hours a day will need enough food for morning tea and lunch, while children attending for eight hours or longer will need more. Foods will stay fresher and taste better if they're individually wrapped - waxed paper is easier for children to unwrap than plastic wrap. Try to include:

- Two to three serves of calcium foods such as milk, cheese, yoghurt, lebneh, tofu, calcium-enriched soymilk or custard.
- One good source of iron, eg beef, lamb or veal, or two moderate sources of iron such as fish, pork, ham, chicken, egg, peanut butter, tofu,* hummous, beans, lentils or chick peas, baked beans, wholemeal bread or tabbouleh.
- Two cereal foods - bread, raisin bread, rolls, lavash or pitta bread, rice, noodles, pasta or breakfast cereal (try and choose those which are high in fibre).
- One serve of fruit - fresh, or cooked fruit, or a 'snack pack' of fruit (from the canned fruit section of supermarkets), or fruit salad.
- One serve of vegetables such as cherry tomatoes, leftover vegetables or vegetable based sauce, salad, avocado, cucumber, grated carrot, pitted olives, tabbouleh, celery, capsicum, cold potato or potato salad.

Which foods to avoid?

- Anything that makes sandwiches and rolls soggy.
- Foods that stick to children's teeth and encourage decay such as honey, jam or chocolate spread, health food bars, lollies and fruit straps, and sweetened condensed milk.
- Chips and other salty, fatty snack foods, sweet biscuits, chocolate and soft drinks. Many children enjoy these foods, but it's best to keep them for occasional treats rather than everyday foods - they have little nutritional value and if children fill up on them, they're less likely to eat healthy foods.
- Foods that may cause choking such as whole nuts, popcorn, hard pieces of fruit or vegetables (cut or grate into smaller pieces) hard lollies, corn chips, and frankfurter sausage skins.

Making sure food stays fresh and safe to eat.

Foods like meat, fish, poultry, eggs, noodles, rice, pasta, custard, yoghurt, cheese and milk need keeping very cold to prevent food poisoning germs growing in them. Keep food cold while travelling to childcare by using either a frozen drink or frozen freezer pack, and an insulated lunch box. Lunch boxes (labelled with the child's name) should be refrigerated at the centre as soon as possible.

Ensuring your child has enough to drink

Children need plenty of fluid through the day. Make sure water is available at the centre. Other good drinks include full cream milk or calcium-enriched soymilk. Fruit juice is okay - but children only need a little (about 250mls each day diluted with water). Encourage children to eat fruit rather than drink juice, and to drink water or milk.

What if there's no time for breakfast?

If there's no time for breakfast at home, pack something to eat on the way - like a sandwich and a drink of milk - or send along extra food to eat at the centre. You may be able to provide the centre or carer with breakfast cereal and milk each week for your child to eat.

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.