Pack healthy school lunches: beware of junk food disguised as healthy foods

Junk food in disguise

Need ideas on how to pack healthy school lunches? Beware of junk food masquerading as healthy food. Dr. Roxanne Sukol, an internist who writes the popular nutrition blog Your Health is on Your Plate , mom of three children, and friend of Dr. Kardos's from medical school, shares her insights.

What should we pack in our children's lunch bags?

The key to retraining our children to eat real food is to restore historical patterns of food consumption. My great-grandparents didn't eat potato chips, corn chips, sun chips, or moon chips. They ate a slice of whole-grain rye bread with a generous smear of butter or cream cheese. They didn't eat

fruit roll-ups. They ate apricots, peaches, plums, and grapes. Fresh or dried. Depending on where your family originated, you might have eaten a thick slice of Mexican white cheese (queso blanco), or a generous wedge of cheddar cheese, or brie. Sunflower seeds, dried apples, roasted almonds. Peanut butter or almond butter. Small containers of yogurt. Slices of cucumbers, pickles, or peppers. All of these make good snacks or meals. My mom is proud to have given me slices of Swiss cheese when I was a hungry toddler out for a stroll with my baby brother. Maybe that's how I ended up where I am today.

When my own children were toddlers, I gave them tiny cubes of frozen tofu to grasp and eat. I packed school lunches with variations on the following theme: 1) a sandwich made with whole grain bread, 2) a container of fruit (usually apple slices, orange slices, kiwi slices, berries, or slices of pear), and 3) a small bag of homemade trail mix (usually peanuts + raisins). The sandwich was usually turkey, mayo and lettuce; or sliced Jarlsberg cheese, sliced tomato, and cream cheese; or tuna; or peanut butter, sometimes with thin slices of banana. On Fridays I often included a treat, like a few small chocolates.

Homemade trail mix is one terrific snack.

It can be made with any combination of nuts, seeds, and/or dried fruit, plus bits of dark chocolate if desired. Remember that dark chocolate is good for you (in small amounts). Dried apple slices, apricots, kiwi or banana chips, raisins, and currants are nutritious and delicious, and so are pumpkin seeds and sunflower seeds, especially of course in homes with nut allergies. Trail mix can be simple or involved. Fill and secure baggies with ¼ cup servings, and refrigerate them in a closed container until it's time to make more. I would include grains, like rolled oats, only for children who are active and slender.

What do I consider junk food?

Chips of all kinds, as well as those "100 calorie packs," which are invariably filled with 100 calories of refined carbohydrate (white flour and sugar) in the form of crackers (®Ritz), cereal (®Chex), or cookies (®Chips Ahoy).

You can even find junk food snacks for babies and toddlers now: The main ingredients in popular Gerber Puffs® are refined flour and sugar. Reviewers tout: "You just peel off the top and pour when you need some pieces of food, then replace the cap and wait for the next feeding opportunity." **Are we at the zoo**? "He would eat them all day long if I let him." **This is not a benefit. It means that the product is not nutritious enough to satisfy the child's hunger.**

A note about drinks

Beware not only of drinks that contain minimal amounts of juice, but also of juice itself. Even 100% fruit juice is simply a concentrated sugar-delivery system. A much better approach is to teach children to drink water when they are thirsty, (See my post entitled **One Step at a Time**) and to snack on fresh fruit when they are hungry. Milk works, too, especially if they are both hungry and thirsty!

Roxanne Sukol, MD

Roxanne B. Sukol, MD is board-certified in Internal Medicine and practices Preventive Medicine in the Wellness Institute at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. Dr. Sukol's nutrition blog Your Health is on Your Plate *celebrates ten years of blogging this summer. Since **her** patients (the grown-ups) are the ones packing the school lunches for **our** patients, we thank her for this post.*

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