

Quick and healthy bag lunches ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Going into school this year, I am going to bring a sack lunch. I was wondering what I should bring that would be healthy and not take a lot of preparation time?

Please help ? Thanks,
S

Answer

Dear S,

If you are what you eat, being healthy and time efficient sound like great qualities to have! Whether your motivations include saving time or money, improving your nutrition, maintaining or losing weight, or fostering your culinary skills, preparing your own lunch is a grand idea! Doing so can be a way to cater to your individual needs, nutritionally and conveniently, and to energize you through your busy days at school and beyond. With everything else that's on your plate, preparing nutritious foods may seem like a challenge. However, with a few easy and balanced tips, you'll be savoring a tasty lunch in no time.

First, a little review of the food groups may serve up some hot and cool lunch options. Main food groups include:

- **Fruits**, naturally sweet and juicy, are great as salad ingredients, sides, or snacks. Grab a fruit that comes with its own wrapper (e.g. apples, oranges, bananas) or a small container of grapes or cut melon. Dried and canned fruits may also make for portable options.
- **Grains** come as whole and refined grains. Whole grains use the entire kernel of the grain (e.g., whole wheat flour items, brown rice, oatmeal, popcorn). Refined grains have been milled to remove their bran and germ (e.g., white flour, white rice, white bread, pasta, noodles). They're great for sandwiches, wraps, noodle or rice dishes, and snacks.
- **Vegetables** (raw, cooked, fresh, frozen, or canned) are easy to transport and are nutritious! Convenient versions include bite-sized vegetables (think baby carrots or cut celery sticks), salads, wrap fillers, soups, and potato dishes.
- **Meat and beans** make great sandwiches or wraps with turkey, lean ham or roast beef, nut butter, fish (e.g., tuna, salmon), or hummus (chickpea spread/dip). They're hearty and complement most grains and vegetables.
- **Dairy products** like milk, yogurt, and cheese (e.g., string cheese, cottage cheese) make

for portable lunch items high in calcium. Try incorporating low-fat versions with less or no added sugar. Calcium-fortified non-dairy products may also be an option.

- **Oils** and fats are part of a healthy diet, but use oils, fats, and their products (e.g., mayonnaise, butter, margarine, lard, animal fat, shortening) sparingly. Avoid trans-fat and limit the amount of food items high in oils and fats, such as some baked items (e.g., cookies, cakes), deep fried foods, and some packaged foods.

Suggestions for compiling easy and healthy lunches include:

- **Make it a combo meal!** Try incorporating three or more food groups into a meal. Focus on fruit, vary your vegetables, consume calcium-rich foods, and make half of your grains whole ones. A sample menu may be a whole wheat pita stuffed with chicken breast, hummus, and spinach with a side of a low-fat yogurt cup and an apple.
- **Keep it simple.** Whole, unprocessed ingredients make for easy preparation and high nutrition. Try having a sizeable stock of fruits, vegetables, nuts, beans, grains, and lean meats as basics for your lunch combinations.
- **Limit sweets and fats.** Try to limit food items high in added sugar and fats, such as soda, cookies, candy, some snack bars, and deep fried items.
- **Make it up ahead of time.** If you're a top chef, make bigger batches of your famous dishes so that you can portion out meals for several days or freeze some for later use. Not a cook? No problem! Give wraps and salads a try.
- **Rotate your menu.** Doing this will ensure that you won't get bored of eating the same thing each day, and this may help you incorporate a full range of food groups.
- **Remember: Safety first!** Wash your hands while preparing and eating. Properly prepare your foods to appropriate temperatures before eating them. If you have access, store your lunch in appropriate temperatures to avoid having your food spoil. An insulated, reusable lunch bag with a reusable cold pack may help you keep your lunch safe and stay green!

For more information about creating a healthy lunch, check out [ChooseMyPlate.gov](#) [2] for more tips and a personalized eating plan. You might also get your friends involved in the planning process. Ask them about their favorite quick and healthy lunches and trade ideas. These make for nutritious conversations and fruitful times with others. Bon appétit!

Alice!

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