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Pack a sack lunch with punch

Focusing on food pyramid, curbing sugar may help kids hit books harder

DES MOINES, IA (August 9, 2010) – The beginning of a new school year is a perfect time to take stock of kids’ nutritional needs, creating new, healthier habits that can also improve academic performance.

“Healthy eating shouldn’t end when you leave home in the morning,” says Julie Enga, RD, a Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield nutrition consultant. “While traditional school lunches maintain minimum nutritional standards, there are no rules for what you bring from home. And often, what we bring from home isn’t all that great.”

Enga recommends building your child’s lunch around the food pyramid. Including the right mix of fruits and vegetables, carbohydrates and protein can give kids the mid-day boost they need to get through the rest of the school day. Easy foods that kids like:

- Grains – whole-grain breads and wraps.
- Dairy – string cheese, milk, yogurt or sliced cheese on sandwiches.
- Meat/protein – lean deli meats, tuna, peanut butter (*NOTE: many schools do not allow peanut products due to student allergies. If your child does take peanut butter to school, urge them to wash their hands carefully after eating*).
- Fresh fruits and vegetables – carrot or celery sticks, cherry tomatoes and virtually any type of fruit.

Enga also recommends getting children involved. “Set guidelines on what types of foods should be included on the lunch menu, and work with your child to select an item from each area of the pyramid,” she says. “Everybody wins – the kids will get the food they want, and you’ll know it’s healthy.”

Additional suggestions:

Buy a better lunchbox. That trusty brown paper sack might work for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but it limits your options for variety. A better option is an insulated box (hard or soft) that can accommodate ice packs and not smash the grapes.

Pack an after-school snack for kids involved in extracurricular activities. “If your child is famished when they get home, they’re much more likely to grab chips or cookies to tide them over until dinner,” Enga says.

Make it fun. Cut sandwiches into shapes, and encourage kids to help shop for their lunch.

Don’t forget the drink. The best lunch drinks are milk and water, Enga says. Fruit juices are often filled with sugar, and are not a substitute for eating the fruit itself.

Even sweets are okay, if used in moderation. Avoid pre-packaged desserts, which are filled with refined sugars and fat, and have very little nutritional value. Pudding cups, or apple slices with caramel packs, are better options. Also, while 100-calorie packs may seem like a healthy alternative, they are generally highly processed and offer little nutritional value.

“Kids are kids, so they’ll eat every last bit of sugar you put into their lunch,” Enga says. “A little treat is okay, but too much sugar will cause a mid-afternoon crash.”

The final key, according to Enga, is *variety*. “Encourage your kids to eat something different each day, even if they don’t want to,” she says. “Learning to enjoy a variety of foods will pay dividends far into the future.”

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