



Packed lunches

About a third of our children bring a packed lunch to school rather than eating food prepared at school. Recent reports, however, have shown that the food typically eaten in lunchboxes provides too much fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt - and not enough fruits and vegetables and essential nutrients.

The packed lunch represents approximately a third of the child's daily food intake and therefore it is important that it offers a meal in line with the [Eatwell food profile](#) to ensure that all the nutrients needed are provided.

What is in a typical lunchbox?

About 70% of children's lunchboxes contain crisps, cheese products, chocolate bars and biscuits and only half of all lunchboxes contain a fruit or vegetable - with very few containing both. In almost a fifth of lunchboxes there is no starchy food such as sandwiches, pasta, rice or an equivalent and therefore lacking healthy starchy foods. Many packed lunches contain soft drinks, increasing the sugar content of the packed lunch.

The UK government produced packed lunch guidance to support the implementation of new school food standards for school lunches and ensure that all children benefit from eating quality food during the school day.

The guidelines are:

- One portion of fruit and one portion of vegetable or salad every day to be included in packed lunches
- Meat, fish or another source of non-dairy protein should be included every day. Non dairy sources of protein include lentils, kidney beans, chickpeas, hummus, peanut butter and falafel
- An oily fish, such as salmon, should be included at least once every three weeks
- A starchy food, such as bread or pasta, rice, couscous, noodles, potatoes or other cereals, should be included every day
- A dairy food, such as semi-skimmed or skimmed milk, cheese, yoghurt, fromage frais or custard should be included every day
- Free, fresh drinking water should be available at all times
- Include only water, still or sparkling, fruit juice, semi-skimmed or skimmed milk, yoghurt or milk drinks and smoothies
- Snacks such as crisps should not be included. Instead, include nuts, seeds, vegetables and fruit (with no added salt, sugar or fat). Savoury

crackers or breadsticks served with fruit, vegetables or dairy food are also a good choice

- Confectionery such as chocolate bars, chocolate-coated biscuits and sweets should not be included. Cakes and biscuits are allowed but these should be part of a balanced meal
- Meat products such as sausage rolls, individual pies corned meat and sausages / chipolatas should be included only occasionally

What's in a healthy packed lunch?

A child at school should have about a third of their daily nutrient requirements at lunchtime. This means they need food that are going to provide them with enough energy, protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals.

A healthy packed lunch should contain a mix of foods from the [EatWell Plate](#). The EatWell Plate shows how much should be eaten from each of the 5 food groups.

A good packed lunch contains:

- A starchy food, such as bread, rolls, pitta bread, naan bread, potatoes, rice, noodles.
- These foods are good for children to fill up on.
- A good source of protein, iron and zinc such as meat, fish, beans, nuts or eggs.
- A good source of calcium such as milk, cheese, yoghurt or fromage frais.
- And one portion of fruit and one portion of vegetable or salad to provide all the other vitamins and minerals. A piece of fruit could be a 100% juice or piece of fresh fruit, dried fruit or tinned fruit in fruit juice. A piece of vegetable could be a fresh vegetables such as carrot stick, salad or a vegetable soup or vegetable dish.

No single food contains all the essential nutrients the body needs to be healthy and function efficiently so it is important that the content of the packed lunch is varied.

What about snacks such as crisps, cakes, pastries and sweets?

These foods should only be given occasionally. Children will then appreciate them more.

If these foods are included in packed lunches they might eat these first and not have the appetite to eat the other foods that will provide them with the important nutrients they need to grow and develop, be healthy and active.