

EARLY YEARS PACKED LUNCHES



This leaflet provides practical ideas for anyone who is preparing packed lunches for children from 1 to 4 years. It will be particularly useful to early years child minders who may want to provide guidance to families and child carers about how to provide a nutritious, cost-effective and practical packed lunch for children of this age.

The key to a healthy, balanced, nutritious diet is variety. If a range of packed lunches are eaten over a period of a week or more, containing a selection of foods from the 4 food groups shown in the table below, they will provide the important nutrients that young children need to develop and grow.

What should go into a packed lunch for 1-4 year olds?

One or two portions of STARCHY FOOD: these foods provide carbohydrates to give children energy for activity in the afternoon.

White or wholegrain bread or rolls, bagel, tortilla or wrap, pitta bread or chapatti. Cooked potato, yam, pasta, noodles, rice, couscous, polenta or other grains; Fruit bun, malt; loaf or raisin bread

At least one portion each of vegetables and fruits: these foods provide vitamins and minerals to help protect against illness.

VEGETABLES Cucumber, Carrots, Tomatoes, Celery, Red or Green Peppers, Sweetcorn, Mixed salad, Green beans, Sugar snap peas, Peas & **FRUIT** Apple, Pear, Banana, Clementine, Strawberries, Grapes, Kiwi, Melon, Pineapple, Mango, Fruit canned in fruit juice; Dried fruit: raisins, apricots, figs or dates

One portion of PROTEIN FOOD: these foods provide protein, iron and zinc to help children grow

Meat, fish, eggs, beans, lentils or other alternatives, Chicken, turkey, beef, lamb, pork, sardine, tuna or Salmon, Egg, Houmous or other pulses and beans, Dahl or other lentil dishes, Tahini or other seed spreads; Tofu; Nut butters

At least one portion of **MILK OR DAIRY FOODS**, or alternatives: these foods are a good source of calcium, for strong bones and teeth

Milk to drink: Whole milk for children under 2 ys, Semi-skimmed milk for children 2 years and over or Dairy-free milk alternatives such as Unsweetened calcium-fortified soya milk, oat milk or almond milk. Dairy foods: Plain yoghurt, Plain fromage frais; Cheese, Rice pudding, Semolina pudding,

A drink to help with hydration & concentration: Water is the best choice or milk. Avoid: fruit juice even if diluted; squash, fizzy drinks and flavoured water even if labelled 'sugar free' 'no added sugar', these contribute to tooth decay and have little nutritional value

What to avoid:

- Make sure food for 1-4 year olds is low in salt. Avoid foods for adults, take-aways & foods that are high in salt such as processed meat, salty snacks, biscuits, sauces and ready-prepared meals and desserts.
- Limit sugar intake. Children do not need sugary foods such as sweets, biscuits, cakes chocolate, soft drinks or sugar for energy. Sugary foods can damage teeth and provide calories but few nutrients Starchy foods – such as potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and yam are better sources of energy, as they contain other important nutrients too. Use fruit to sweeten yoghurts and desserts.
- Children aged 1-4 years should not be given foods or drinks containing artificial sweeteners (such as saccharin and aspartame), the preservative E211 or the artificial colours E102, E104, E110, E122, E124 or E129.
- Children should not be given tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks or other drinks that contain caffeine as these disrupt children's sleep.

Practical tips for healthy, safe and tasty packed lunches

Communication with parents:

1. Find out if there are any food allergies
2. Store in the fridge. If going on a trip use a cool bag and a frozen bottle of water or reusable ice-pack
3. Throw away packed lunch leftovers;

Choosing foods

4. Vary lunchbox contents for a good balance of nutrients
5. Seasonal fruits and veg add vitamins, colour, texture and are often cheaper and tastier
6. Read food labels, look out for the colour coded nutrition information on the front of packets the more green the healthier the choice

Preparing the packed lunch

7. Include children in shopping, choosing and preparing their lunchboxes – guiding food choices from the food groups above.
8. Wash hands thoroughly before preparing and eating.
9. Wash fruit and veg and remove any stones.
10. Keep contents fresh, rinse sliced apples in water with lemon juice to stop going brown
11. Think sustainably, use containers and cutlery that can be washed and used again

Packed lunch examples:

Egg roll, cucumber and tomato, yoghurt and blueberries



Turkey kebabs, new potatoes, fruit bun, satsuma and milk drink



Here are some ideas for packed lunches:

Key: DF =dairy free; EF=egg free; GF=gluten free; V=suitable for vegetarians; VV=suitable for vegans

- Boiled egg, cheese cubes, toast slices and broccoli spears, and raisins V
- Cheese and cucumber sandwiches, green beans and pepper, and rice pudding with raisins V EF
- Chicken, pasta, red pepper, lettuce, kiwi and milk drink EF
- Dahl, chapatti, rice and tomato, and soya yoghurt with grapes V VV EF DF
- Egg roll, cucumber and tomato, and yoghurt and blueberries V
- Mixed beans, pitta bread, houmous and cucumber, and apple sauce and custard V EF
- Pitta bread with houmous and carrot, banana and soya milk drink V VV EF DF
- Pizza, carrot sticks, yellow pepper, dates and milk drink V EF
- Rice and peas, jerk chicken, sweetcorn, tomatoes and mango EF DF GF
- Roast vegetable couscous and chickpeas, with soya yoghurt and strawberries V VV EF DF
- Sardine sandwiches, tomatoes, peas and banana, and milk drink EF
- Tuna and sweetcorn pasta, red pepper, celery, malt loaf and melon EF

The recipes and photos of all the suggestions above and lots more packed lunch information including packed lunch examples can be found on First Steps Nutrition website in the eating well: packed lunch or 1-4 year olds resource <https://www.firststepsnutrition.org/eating-well-early-years>

