



# a pediatrician's 10 tips for packing a nutritious lunch

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I know it's a challenge to pack an interesting, well-balanced lunch kids will eat, and do this DAY AFTER DAY. To help, we use the very recognizable USDA "Choose My Plate" to serve as a guide for organizing a great lunch. This graphic shows a plate with four roughly equal sections labeled Fruit, Vegetables, Grains, and Protein. If these four groups are used to plan, packing school lunch can be a breeze (see table below). Here are TEN tips for packing a great school lunch!

**1. The lunchbox matters:** Try picking one you and your child both like. We chose one from EasyLunchboxes.com. It's an affordable bento box-style system that is easy to clean (one box and lid instead of three) and helps us organize different food groups easily. There is plenty of room for snacks, drinks, and icepacks too. Bento style boxes are great so kids don't waste time on opening many lids and baggies. Just open one lid and everything is right there at their fingertips! Have a small thermos for occasional hot items like soups and stews.

**2. Keep it colorful:** Lunch will look interesting and appealing if you have lots of colors, and it will likely be more nutritious too. Try different dips like hummus and yogurt dressing for veggies. Occasionally pack a homemade sweet treat full of nutrition.

**3. Make leftovers work:** A great dinner from the day before can be enjoyed for lunch the next day. Make life easy and let one meal do double duty. Use soups or stews packed in a thermos especially in the winter. Make Sunday's leftover pancakes into a pancake sandwich on Monday! Check out lots of easy and yummy recipes for school lunches on [doctoryum.org](http://doctoryum.org).

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## packing a nutritious lunch

**4. Keep pantry and freezer staples:** Have plenty of options stocked in your pantry and freezer so you do not always have to rely on fresh foods. For example, dried fruits like raisins can substitute for fresh. Keeping a bag of frozen edamame means you always can pack something green. Keep canned tuna in case you run out of protein options. Have different choices so you can always pack a great lunch in a pinch.

**5. Pack new things:** It's easy to want to pack the same favorite foods repeatedly because we know our kids like them. However, exposure to a variety of different foods is what grows an adventurous eater. When packing something new for kids, make sure your other lunch box compartments are filled with things they like. That way they will not feel too hungry if they are still practicing a new food.

**6. Try, try again:** If your child does not love something new that you have tried, don't be afraid to pack it again. Research shows it takes many exposures to a new food before a child may accept it (some researches say as many as 15-20 exposures). A recent study showed that 94% of parents give up on a food before their child tries it five times! Kids are less likely to be adventurous, healthy eaters if parents do not persist in exposing them to good nutrition.

**7. Pack as "waste-free" as possible:** If you find a great lunch box, you will not need throw-aways like plastic sandwich bags. Find cloth napkins in fun patterns. Use colorful stainless steel water bottles and pack water (with or without fresh fruit included) as the daily drink. Juice boxes leave waste and provide little but empty sugar calories. The kids will love these waste-free items and you will be showing them how to take care of the planet!

**8. Remember seasonal items:** Seasonal local foods are fresher and taste better. Packing more seasonally means kids get to try different foods each month.

**9. Don't forget iron and calcium:** Kids are growing and need plenty of iron and calcium. You don't necessarily have to eat meat or dairy to pack in these important nutrients. Have other options on hand that are iron and calcium-rich like fortified lentils, beans, tofu, nuts, seeds, dried fruits and leafy greens.

**10. Get kids involved:** Ask them to help with choosing, preparing, and packing lunch items. They are more likely to enjoy food when they are involved. Try using our LUNCH PACKING MAP, and help your kids write in the choices available each week for each food group. This will make it easier to choose what they pack. Then each day help them pick one food from each group to pack in their lunchbox.

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packing a nutritious lunch

# examples for your lunch packing map:

## fruit

- Berries
- Raisins/Dried Fruit
- Pomegranate Arils
- Plain Yogurt with Fruit
- Unsweetened Applesauce
- Orange Sections
- Apples
- Banana

## grain

- Whole Wheat Bread
- Tortilla Chips
- Pita Bread
- English Muffin
- Whole Wheat Pasta
- Brown Rice
- Quinoa
- Sweet Potato
- Granola
- Whole grain wrap

## vegetable

- Carrot Sticks
- Broccoli
- Blanched Vegetables
- Frozen Edamame
- Sugar Snap Peas
- Cherry Tomatoes
- Vegetable Soup
- Kale Chips

## protein

- Yogurt
- Cheese
- Meats
- Hummus
- Bean Salads
- Bean Dip
- Meatballs
- Boiled Eggs
- Nuts or nut butters

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# dr. yum's lunch packing map for food explorers

**fruit**


**grain**


**vegetable**


**protein**


**At the beginning of the week fill in the foods you have available at home for each food group. Then each day pick one food from each group to pack in your lunchbox.**

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