

Daily Union Article

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Title: Power Packed Lunch

My growing boys seem to be bottomless pits when it comes to mealtime. It never fails that I prepare an evening meal with the intent of having ample left-overs only to find there to be no food left for that purpose at the end of the meal.

The same holds true for their lunches. Lunch, like any other meal, is important for the health and well-being of any one of us. If we aren't intentional about how we select or pack our lunch, we may be depriving our bodies of the necessary fat, protein, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals to keep us healthy and active. Eating a power packed lunch helps maintain an active metabolism – our body's process for converting the food and drink into energy. If we pack an inadequate lunch or skip eating lunch all together, our metabolism slows and what food we do eat will be stored as fat, which can lead to weight gain.

Since I pack lunches for my boys on most school days, I find myself on the lookout for variations, modifications, and improvements for the standard sandwich, fruit, and vegetable options.

Here are some ideas on what can be put in their bag to make it a power packed lunch.

Low-fat Ham or Turkey and cheese roll. I use whole wheat tortilla shells to wrap the meat and cheese in. You can add a small portion of reduced fat ranch dressing for a boost of flavor. Slip in sliced cucumbers or shredded carrots to round it out with some vegetables. I usually add a banana or orange wedges to this meal for fruit. Bananas are available during all seasons of the year in Kansas. They are fat free, saturated fat free, sodium free, cholesterol free and serve as a good source of fiber, vitamin C, and potassium.

To add more variety, you can take these same ingredients and put them between whole wheat sandwich "slim" buns. If you want to add lettuce to the sandwich, I suggest you try Romaine or Leaf lettuce. These darker green lettuce options are a much richer source of vitamins and minerals than Iceberg lettuce is. Keep a bag of leaf spinach on hand and add 4 – 6 leaves to the sandwich. Spinach is an excellent source of vitamins A, C, and folate, as well as minerals such as manganese, magnesium, calcium, zinc, and iron. It is also a good source of fiber and even contributes a small amount of protein to the diet.

Fruit and Yogurt Parfait: If you are tired of packing sandwich based meals, try creating a fruit parfait. You can purchase small "to-go" plastic cups with lids at many discount stores or you can buy a small bowl to pack a parfait in. Start with a scoop of low-fat or

nonfat flavored yogurt. I like to use vanilla for myself, but my children really like the strawberry flavored yogurt. Next, add some sliced bananas and crunchy walnuts or almonds. Put another scoop of yogurt on top of the fruit and nuts. Next add some mandarin oranges drained from a "packed in natural juice" can. Some people like to put some flaked coconut on top of the oranges. It just depends on what the taste preferences of whoever is eating the parfait. Finally, add your final scoop of yogurt and cover. Put some whole grain granola in a snack bag to add on top later for some extra crunch and flavor. If you place the granola on top of the yogurt when you make the parfait, within an hour, the granola gets soggy. You can purchase whole grain granola in the grocery store or use homemade. Here's a recipe from the USDA Mixing bowl recipe archive.

CINNAMON VANILLA GRANOLA

Ingredients

2 tablespoons honey
1/2 cup water
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
4 cups uncooked rolled oats (oatmeal)
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon salt

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 275°F.
2. Mix honey, water, vegetable oil, vanilla extract, cinnamon, and salt in a large bowl.
3. Stir in oats; mix well.
4. Spread mixture on a cookie sheet, making a thin layer.
5. Bake for 20 minutes. Remove from oven, stir mixture well and return to oven.
6. Bake 20 more minutes and stir as before.
7. Bake 5-20 more minutes, until granola is golden brown.
8. Break into small pieces with spatula.
9. Cool and then store in a covered container.

Source: <https://whatscooking.fns.usda.gov/recipes>

Both of the lunch box menu alternatives I have offered here require refrigeration to keep the food safe. However, a good quality insulated lunch bag with a frozen water bottle inside will hold the temperature at a safe level for up to 6 hours and offers cold water to drink with the meal.

Don't think you need to do all the work for your children's lunch. Have them help in the selection and packing process. They are more likely to eat their lunch when they have been involved in the process. On nights when you have a bit more time to get the

packed lunches ready, have your kids choose which piece of fruit or what type of whole grain bread they want and let them assemble their lunch. Not only does this help them appreciate the meal more, it adds to the amount of time you get to spend with your children.

Help your kids (or yourself) power up your packed lunch by adding variation and healthy options to the meal and enjoy more time together. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!