Healthy Lunchbox Ideas

A healthy meal has at least 3 of the 5 food groups. The 5 foods groups are fruits, vegetables, protein, dairy, and grains. Aim for packed lunches to include a whole grain, lean protein or low-fat dairy product, and fruit or vegetable at a minimum. If you can include all 5 food groups in your lunch- even better!

The list below includes options that will serve up a well-balanced and filling meal.

Cold Lunch Entry Options

- **Italian tortellini:** Tortellini, mozzarella cheese, red onion, spinach leaves and cherry tomatoes. Drizzle with pesto or Italian dressing.
- **Wrap it up:** Turkey and cheese wrapped in a whole wheat tortilla served with raw cauliflower or a plum.
- **Deli meat roll-up**: Lean roast beef, ham, or turkey wrapped around spinach and cream cheese served with a side of blueberries.
- **Hawaiian pita:** Lean ham with green pepper and pineapple chunks served in a pita.
- **Chef salad:** Lean ham and turkey with turkey bacon, cheese, lettuce, cucumber, and tomato. Chop up ingredients and add low fat ranch dressing. Serve with whole grain crackers.
- **Taco fresco:** Chopped chicken breast with sweet peppers, avocado, corn, and tomato. Serve with whole grain tortilla chips.
- **Teatime:** Light cream cheese with sliced cucumber and dill on whole grain bread. Serve with a hard-boiled egg on the side.
- **Mediterranean bowl:** Quinoa served with hummus, falafel, diced cucumber and tomatoes, black olives, and a side of tzatziki sauce.
- **Vegetarian:** Hummus with cucumber, grated carrot and lettuce in a whole grain pita.
- **PB&B:** Peanut butter with sliced banana on whole grain bread. You can purchase utensils online to remove the crust and seal the sandwich just like an Uncrustable®.
- **Fancy PBJ:** Strawberry jelly with fresh strawberry slices on top and peanut butter with chopped peanuts on top served on whole grain bread.
- **Rainbow veggie spring rolls:** Avocado, sliced red pepper, bean sprouts, shredded carrot, and edamame rolled in rice paper. Serve with peanut dipping sauce.
- **From the sea:** Tuna salad made with olive oil mayo, sliced grapes, and celery. Serve with whole grain crackers.
- **Salmon roll ups:** Layer sticky rice, diced cucumber, and salmon (from a packet) on top of a piece of dry roasted seaweed. Roll-up and add a toothpick to help the wrap keep its shape. Serve with some low sodium soy sauce for dipping.
- **Dairy day:** Low fat cottage cheese with whole grain crackers and sliced peaches.
- **Overnight oats:** A base of oats, milk, and chia seeds combined with your choice of toppings. Consider trying:
  - Chocolate brownie oats topped with frozen raspberries
  - Carrot cake inspired oats prepared with real carrot shavings and walnuts

    - Pumpkin spice oats with pumpkin puree and autumn spices.
    - Apple cinnamon oats with apple cubes.
    - Strawberry cheesecake oats blended with cottage cheese, strawberries, and topped with graham cracker crumbles.
- **Homemade pizza "Lunchable":** Pizza sauce and shredded mozzarella cheese alongside multigrain sandwich thins. These items can be combined to make a "pizza" at the lunch table. Add mini pepperonis for some extra protein and/or basil leaves for some extra flavor.
- **Homemade meat and cheese "Lunchable":** Include a protein option such as summer sausage, turkey jerky, or a beef stick; a dairy product such as a cheese stick, cheese curds, or a soft cheese (Laughing Cow® or brie); and whole grain crackers.
- **Vegetarian "snackle" box:** Include a protein option such as nuts, nut butter, dry roasted edamame, or dry roasted chickpeas; fresh or dried fruit; fresh chopped vegetables; and pretzels.

Some schools allow access to microwaves in the lunchroom. See below for healthy, reheated lunch options.

Reheated Lunch Options

- **Soups:** Healthy, balanced soup options include such as
    - Veggie-packed turkey and bean chili and a slice of corn bread
    - Lasagna soup with greens (such as kale) added to soup
    - Chicken pot pie soup prepared with egg noodles or served over rice
    - Chicken or chickpea tikka masala prepared with zucchini and cucumbers and served over rice
- **Breakfast for lunch:** Mini whole grain and/or protein-added pancakes served alongside frozen berries and chicken sausage. The berries will melt by lunchtime and make a delicious sauce the pancakes can be dipped into.
- **Breakfast burrito bowl:** Crispy roasted breakfast potatoes, sauteed bell peppers and onions, scrambled eggs, and black beans, served with salsa, low fat sour cream, and chipotle aioli.
- **Korean beef** (made with lean ground beef or ground turkey) served over brown rice with green onions and roasted broccoli.
- **Shrimp** with lemon sauce served over whole grain or chickpea pasta and served with a side of roasted green beans prepared with lemon juice and shallots.
- **Roasted chicken breast** served with mashed potatoes and roasted carrots and a side of gravy.
- **Taco seasoned ground bison** served on top of fresh spring greens mix with a side of whole grain tortilla chips and salsa.
- **Bean burrito:** Spread mashed black beans on a whole grain tortilla. Top with guacamole, salsa, and cheese.
- **Any leftovers with a protein, fruit or vegetable, and starch.**

Meal Prepping

Meal prepping is an excellent option for preparing delicious meals that take minimal effort to reheat during the week. However, you can also prep many cold lunch options for an easy morning of grab n' go.

Meal prepping tips and tricks:

- Do your dishes throughout the week. This will help make next week's preparation less overwhelming.
- Do not feel like you can only use fresh foods. Canned and frozen fruits,

vegetables, beans, and meats can be just as healthy and much easier to prepare than fresh versions of these items.
- Follow recommendations for reheating/storing leftovers to prevent food borne illness and keep your food tasting its best.
- Meal prepping does not mean you have to prepare every part of the meal. You can always prep or pre-portion some ingredients to quickly throw together the night before or in the morning you would like to eat that specific meal. For example, wash, chop, and store fresh fruits and vegetables in individual containers for easy access to make a salad in the morning.

More Than Just an Entry
Many kids also like to include extra food in their lunch boxes to have at snack time and/or to enjoy on the side. Try some of these ideas.

Additional protein ideas:
- Dried edamame
- Dried chickpeas
- Low fat cheese stick
- Greek yogurt
- Turkey jerky
- Beef stick
- Hummus with pita chips
- Nut butter pouch
- Flavored Greek yogurt

Making fruits and veggies more interesting:
- Sliced apples or pears + cinnamon
- Sliced mango + chili powder
- Jicama sticks + Tajin®
- Strawberries + chocolate hummus
- Hawaiian fruit salad with pineapple, mandarin oranges, and unsweetened coconut flakes
- No sugar added freeze-dried fruit
- No sugar added fruit leather
- Fruit and veggie sauce pouch
- Less traditional vegetables such as olives or pickles.
- Wasabi peas
- Fresh veggies such as mini sweet peppers, sugar snap peas, or mini cucumbers with a yogurt-based ranch dip, traditional ranch dressing, or humus. Here is a recipe that will make multiple servings: 1 cup plain, nonfat Greek yogurt + 2 tablespoons olive oil + 1/4 of a ranch seasoning packet.
- Serve fresh fruit such as apple slices or strawberries with a yogurt-based peanut butter dip. Here is a recipe that will make multiple servings: 1 cup plain, nonfat Greek yogurt + 2 tablespoons peanut butter (unsweetened) + ½-1 tablespoon of honey or maple syrup. Sprinkle top with mini chocolate chips.

Other carbohydrate-based items:
- Whole grain crackers or chips (such as Sun Chips®)
- Air popped popcorn
- Small cookie, fig newtons, or other dessert

Who to Call
If you have questions, please contact your provider through MyChart or call your provider listed in your After Visit Summary or After Hospital Care Plan.

For a list of UW Health Clinics, please visit www.uwhealth.org/.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 8/2026 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#490.