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Lunch Means So Much More Than Fast Food

By Elizabeth McDonnell

Lunch is the forgotten stepchild of the meal day. We spend a fair amount of energy planning dinner, and we (sometimes begrudgingly) spend some energy making sure we eat breakfast. But more than one of us has looked at the clock at noon, realized we are hungry and then scarfed down whatever was available and easy.

Too often, that means fast food, vending machine food or - for some people - nothing at all. And this is truly unfortunate. Nutrition experts tell us again and again that eating three meals and two snacks a day is the surest path to good nutrition and a balanced diet. And even if you are eating lunch, a hamburger and fries doesn't get you very far on the path to good nutrition.

So, how do you change this? Lunch is a tough one for people who work outside the home. Sure, you can pack leftovers from dinner, but what if there aren't any or you didn't like dinner in the first place? Making a sandwich and adding some fruit sounds easy, but that's just one more thing to do in the morning and if you're in a rush, it's one of the first chores you'll discard.

Here are some tips to bring lunch back into focus on busy weekdays:

*Do plan for leftovers, if possible. If you like what you're making for dinner and think you wouldn't mind having it for lunch tomorrow, set aside some before everyone else gets fed. Put it into the fridge and your family will never know a portion of the entree is missing. Best of all, you've already done the work. Add a piece of fruit and yogurt and there's lunch tomorrow.

*If you must have fast food, stay away from fries, most hamburgers, anything breaded and fried and most salads. Yes, I said salads. Sure, you'll get some nutritional content from the lettuce and all the other goodies on the salad, but the dressing might have as much as 30 grams of fat in it, most of it saturated fat. Stick with light dressings or even keep a bottle of dressing in the fridge at work. Otherwise, stay away from fast food salads (and they're never that good anyway). Try a grilled chicken sandwich, sans fries.

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*If you're out and about running errands and get hungry, stop at 7–11, and grab a bottle of milk, some trail mix or a granola bar and a piece of fruit. It might not be gourmet, but it will get you through to a small snack later and then dinner.

*Keep lunch items at work. There are many things you can keep in your desk that are shelf stable and still healthy. How about tuna packets and crackers? How about some fruit in its own juice? Nuts, trail mix and granola bars are all good choices. Stay away from sodium–laden canned soups and noodle bowls. Not only can they provide you with more than the maximum sodium you need for one day, they also won't provide the complex carb and protein boost you need to get you through the afternoon and keep you from stalking the vending machine later for an unhealthy snack.

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10 Mind–Easing Ways To Make Sure Your Child's "Bag" Lunch Is Safe

By Terry Nicholls

Perishable food must be kept cold while commuting via bus, bicycle, on foot, in a car, or on the subway. After arriving at school or work, perishable food must be kept cold until lunchtime.

Why? Harmful bacteria multiply rapidly in the "danger zone" (the temperatures between 40° F and 140° F). So, perishable food transported without an ice source won't stay safe long. Here are safe handling recommendations to prevent food–borne illness from "bag" lunches.

1. Perishable food, such as raw or cooked meat and poultry, must be kept cold or frozen at the store and at home. Eggs should be purchased cold at the store and kept cold at home.
2. Transport perishable food as fast as possible when no ice source is available. At the destination, keep it cold. Food should not be left out at room temperature more than 2 hours (1 hour if the temperature is above 90° F).
3. Prepackaged combos that contain luncheon meats along with crackers, cheese, and condiments must also be kept refrigerated. This includes luncheon meats and smoked ham which are cured or contain preservatives.
4. At lunchtime, discard all used food packaging and paper bags. Do not reuse packaging because it could contaminate other food and cause food–borne illness.
5. Pack just the amount of perishable food that can be eaten at lunch. That way, there won't be a problem about the storage or safety of leftovers.
6. It's fine to prepare the food the night before and store the packed lunch in the refrigerator. Freezing sandwiches helps them stay cold. However, for best quality don't freeze sandwiches containing

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mayonnaise, lettuce, or tomatoes. Add these later.

7. Insulated, soft-sided lunch boxes or bags are best for keeping food cold, but metal or plastic lunch boxes and paper bags can also be used. If using paper lunch bags, create layers by double bagging to help insulate the food. An ice source should be packed with perishable food in any type of lunch bag or box.

8. Prepare cooked food, such as turkey, ham, chicken, and vegetable or pasta salads, ahead of time to allow for thorough chilling in the refrigerator. Divide large amounts of food into shallow containers for fast chilling and easier use. Keep cooked food refrigerated until time to leave home.

10. To keep lunches cold away from home, include a small frozen gel pack or frozen juice box. Of course, if there's a refrigerator available, store perishable items there upon arrival.

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Terry Nicholls is the author of the eBook "Food Safety: Protecting Your Family From Food Poisoning". For more tips like these, and to learn more about his book, visit his website at

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