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**Power Foods for a Powerful School Lunch**

By Evan L. Mestman, MS, RD, CDE, CDN

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There isn't a school day that goes by that I worry about my son's lunch. Of course, I ask myself the usual questions: Is he eating what he has in the bag? Will he trade his apple for a cookie? Will the school lunch he's ordering once a week be nutritious? He's a kid! He's not a fussy eater, but there are plenty of days that he has come home with a bag full of food. I'll ask him "what did you eat for lunch?" He always says, "nothing." What's a parent to do?

Plenty of Mom's worry about what to feed their kids for lunch. They always ask me which foods are the best to pack. I believe there's no such thing as a good or bad food. Remember, the food police aren't arresting anyone at Ben and Jerry's. Some foods are much more nutritious than others. The key to feeding your child well is to offer variety and make sure to include fruits and vegetables. Unfortunately, 90% of Americans don't eat the recommended five or more servings of antioxidant-rich and nutritious fruits and vegetables daily. Kids eat even less. While supplementation may guarantee you get enough Vitamin C and Beta Carotene, it's not a substitution for all the thousands of healthful nutrients found in fruits and vegetables that you can't get in a pill. You want your kids to grow up healthy and strong. Here are some winners that will compliment any school lunch and help make your fruit and vegetable choices count.

Broccoli: Here's an all American winner, as if you didn't already know! Broccoli is chock full of vitamins, fiber, and minerals. It taste great, too. Broccoli is high in Vitamin C and carotenoids. These are antioxidants that help boost our immunity and protect our body from environmental insults like cigarette smoke and pollution. The two types of fiber in broccoli, soluble and insoluble, help lower cholesterol, fight cancer, and keep our digestive systems in tip-top shape. Broccoli also contains indoles and isothiocyanates that help decrease estrogen's effectiveness and protect our cell's DNA (the building blocks of genetics and reproduction). It's also an excellent source of folic acid—a B vitamin that seem to be critical for cardiovascular health. Not bad for being green!

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Kids either love it or hate it. Here are some ideas to help you kids eat more of the green stuff. Broccoli tastes best if it's blanched first, cooked in boiling water or steamed for 3 to 4 minutes. Stop the cooking with an ice bath if you want to eat it cold. Marinate it in your favorite light Italian dressing and place it in a zip lock bag for lots of flavor. Substitute broccoli for half the cabbage in your favorite coleslaw recipe and add to a sandwich instead of lettuce and tomato. Don't throw away the stalks.

Carrots: If this vegetable was marketed for its benefits, I bet it would sell for \$20 per pound! Carrots have over 200 carotenoids, one of which is beta carotene. Scientists aren't sure which carotenoid is responsible for protecting us from cancer. Since beta carotene provided such disappointing results in recent research, I'll keep eating carrots and skip the beta carotene. Carrots also contain phenolic acid, a phytochemical that may reduce the risk of cancer.

A great way to get your kids to start eating carrots is top his/her favorite sandwiches with shredded carrots along with lettuce and tomato. Kids will enjoy a bag of baby carrots (they are large carrots cut into small bite-sized pieces) with some low fat dressing on the side for dipping. Even try it shredded on

a peanut butter and jelly sandwich if your kids won't eat their vegetables.

Beans: Most kids won't eat beans, "I don't like them." "They taste yucky." My son loves black beans, soybeans and chickpeas. There are so many different types of beans all with a different texture and flavor. Don't give up on your first try. Beans are a great way to add a powerful nutritious punch to any meal. A large portion of the world population depends on beans to provide them with nutrition. People of the orient uses soybeans, Americans use peas, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries depend on chickpeas and lentils, Africans uses a combination of beans. Beans have the highest source of fiber for a whole food. They also are loaded with cancer-fighting phytochemicals like genistein and flavones. Soybeans have the most impressive list of plant chemicals to help fight, cancer, and high blood pressure, and menopausal symptoms. Add to its long list of benefits its ability to lower blood cholesterol and you have a winner. Use canned beans if you're in a rush. Open a ca!

n of chickpeas, chop up an onion and some red pepper (if your child doesn't like them, you can always substitute another bean and vegetable until they are happy), toss in your favorite salad dressing and let it marinate overnight. Let your child spread black beans or prepared humus (a chickpea spread) on a flour tortilla. When at home, add cheese and chopped onion and cilantro, heat it in the toaster oven or microwave and have a side of salsa with carrot sticks for a delicious and well rounded lunch.

Apricots, Melon, and Papaya: All these fruits are loaded with nutrients. They're high in Vitamin C and mixed carotenoids, potassium and have lots of fiber. Papaya has enzymes that help digestion and break down protein. Some of these enzymes have anti-inflammatory qualities. All of these fruits are great as snack foods in a lunch bag. Whether dried or fresh, these fruits taste great solo or with other foods. Combine dried apricots and toasted almonds for a tasty snack.

Spinach: Here's another vegetable with abundant amounts of beta carotene and potassium. Most kids say they don't like spinach probably because it's cooked incorrectly. Spinach tastes best if cooked when young and tender. Older spinach tends to be woody and tough. Don't use aluminum cookware. The spinach will pick up an acidic taste and lose its beautiful green color. Don't overcook spinach. It

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gets waterlogged easily and is probably the reason why many don't like it. Use it on sandwiches with lettuce and tomato.

**Herbs and Spices and Tea:** Don't to forget to spice up your kid's life with garlic, turmeric, ginger, rosemary and green and black tea. Many parents think kids don't like spices. It's true their taste buds are more sensitive to hot and spicy foods. But, if you don't introduce these flavors at an early age, your children won't learn to like them. These additions to your children's diet will provide antioxidants such as curcumin, lycopene, allicin, and flavonoids. They taste great and may be the hidden ingredients that provide protection from cancer, heart disease, and high blood pressure. Use lightly sweetened green tea mixed with juice for a great tasting thirst–quencher.

Next time you question whether your children's lunch is packing enough nutrition, try these easy ways to add more fruits and vegetables. You'd be surprised how easy it is to fee your children power foods for a powerful body!

Evan L. Mestman, MS, RD, CDE, CDN is the owner of

, the home of the

Pleasure Principle Weight Loss Plan. Lose Weight, With Pleasure!

### **Does Your Student Eat A Hot School Lunch Or Cold Junk?**

**By John Hart**

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 mandates that high schools have a local wellness policy and program in place by July 1, 2006, to promote more healthful food choices by students.

However, a recent study of 271 public high schools by Penn State researchers, published in the February issue of the "Journal of the American Dietetic Association," names three reasons why some high school wellness programs already in place, aren't working.

The study says:

1. 25% of the wellness program directors report that lunch periods are scheduled before 10:30 a.m. Early lunch periods produce higher a la carte sales.
2. A la carte sales generate almost \$700 per day per school among schools surveyed, with \$450 of that income coming from a la carte items that do not meet federal school meal requirements.
3. The existence of soft drink machines owned by soft drink companies correlated with a higher number of vending machines per student. The study showed that more vending machines reduced participation in the school hot lunch program.

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75% of sodas and 85% of snacks sold in school vending machines are junk foods. Many schools have found that replacing junk foods with healthier foods and beverages, such as bottled water, yogurt, fruit, juice, etc., has not hurt the school revenue, and in some cases has actually increased revenue.

What can parents do?

Make sure you know how healthy your local school environment is and what needs to be improved. Visit with food service directors and ask these four questions: 1) What do kids eat when they are at school, 2) Is junk food readily available? 3) How much time is provided for physical activity? And 4) What can be done to make the school environment healthier?

Not all current school wellness programs restrict the sale of high-fat, high-sugar snacks and sodas during the school day. Know what your local school policy is, or will be, because proper nutrition greatly influences a student's learning ability. Which of the three reasons named in the Penn State study could you improve at your student's high school?

Mr. Hart is the author of "Killer Bird Flu...Get Ready Now!" and a medical journalist/researcher. He, and co-author Brook Andersen, recently attended the world's largest nutraceutical show, where the focus was on how to live a healthier and safer life with a better diet and nutrition. Learn more at

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