

Tips for packing a healthy and fun school lunch

By Callie Miller

As summer fades away and the new school year begins, it's time to start planning for the busy days ahead. That includes planning for school lunches.

Research suggests kids who eat a nutrient-dense school lunch perform well in school and meet the energy needs of their growing bodies. Here are some things to consider when planning back-to-school lunches:

- **Check your lunch gear:** Make sure you have the right tools necessary to pack a school lunch. Check your children's current lunch boxes, thermoses, and water bottles. Replace any of the items with new ones if needed.
- **Write a list of their favorite lunches:** Jot down some favorite lunch ideas. Better yet, get your kids involved and have them write out their own list. Use the list to stock up on food items to make their favorite lunch ideas.
- **Prep in bulk:** Every week take some time to prep out the foods before the week starts. A few ideas include pre-cutting and washing produce, making boiled eggs or pre-packaging crackers into snack bags. The small prep you do before the week starts will save you time in the mornings.
- **Prepare lunches:** Kids need a balance of protein, veggies, fruits, whole grains and dairy foods to fuel their bodies. When preparing lunches, try to make sure there is at least one fruit or veggie, protein, whole grain and dairy option if possible.

Here are some fun school lunch ideas to try:

- **Pita:** Make a build-your-own pita box with whole grain pitas, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers and hummus. Add a side of orange slices or other fresh fruit.
- **Quesadilla:** Make a cheese quesadilla on a whole wheat tortilla. Pack with some salsa or guacamole to dip. Add an extra side of fruit to complete the meal.
- **Bento Box:** Make the ultimate DIY "Lunchable" using cheese, lunchmeat, whole grain crackers, fresh strawberries and carrot sticks on the side.
- **Pasta Salad:** Make a big batch of pasta salad using fun pasta shapes, veggies and protein of choice.
- **Sandwich:** Use fun cookie cutters and cut sandwiches into different shapes. Nothing beats a star-shaped PB & J – add a side of carrot sticks and dip or fresh fruit.
- **Wraps:** Mix up the lunch routine with fun wrap ideas. Roll a whole grain tortilla with cream cheese and rainbow veggies or try with almond butter and banana slices.

School lunch is very important for young learners, for both learning and development. Plan ahead, practice meal prep, and most importantly – have fun!

Callie Miller is a registered dietitian with RiverStone Health WIC (Women, Infants and Children) nutrition program. If you have children under age 5, you are pregnant or are a new mom, your family may be eligible for healthy food assistance through WIC. Call 406-247-3370 to learn more.