

5 Tips for Building a Healthful Lunch

What's on your lunch menu? Do you buy lunch or make it at home? For kids, meals at school are a bargain, but sometimes they may want a change of pace with a homemade lunch.

For adults, purchased lunches at a nearby restaurant can add up to a hefty price tag. According to one study*, the average purchased lunch costs about \$8. During a five-day work week, that adds to \$40 per week – or more than \$2,000 per year! Several years have passed since that study was conducted, and food costs have increased.

A well-balanced, home-packed lunch can set you up for success. Eating lunch provides an opportunity to refuel your brain and body after a morning of hard work. Selecting a variety of food groups creates a balanced meal with a healthy supply of different nutrients your body needs to stay focused and avoid that after-lunch slump.



iStock photo

The lunch you prepare at home is almost always more healthful than a purchased meal. Be sure to select a variety of healthful foods with these tips:

1. Pack some protein

Include lean protein in your lunch to help you stay feeling full longer. How about a sandwich made with grilled chicken or meat loaf from last night's dinner? Protein helps build and repair your body. Less expensive protein options include canned fish, beans and eggs.

2. Vary your veggies

Choose a variety of colorful vegetables, which provide vitamins and minerals. Purchase vegetables in season for the best value and nutrient profile. In-season fresh vegetables are often at their best quality and price, but fresh, frozen and canned vegetables all count toward the recommended amount.

3. Welcome whole grains

Try a variety of whole-grain foods such as bulgur, oats, quinoa, brown rice, whole-wheat pasta and wild rice. Be sure to look for the words "whole grain" as one of the first ingredients on the nutrition label.

4. Fill up on fruits

Fruits are a low-calorie way to satisfy your sweet tooth while also getting fiber. Fruits are packed with soluble fiber, which helps keep cholesterol low, and insoluble fiber, which helps keep you regular. As with vegetables, pick a variety of colors and types of fruits to get the best health benefits.

5. Don't forget dairy

Dairy products are well-known for their boost of bone-protecting calcium. However, dairy also may help with blood sugar and blood pressure control. If you cannot tolerate milk, try vitamin D-fortified soymilk, yogurt or another calcium-rich option.

* Source: NPD Group, https://www.npd.com/press/releases/press_080724.html

Build a Healthful Lunch

On the lines provided, write one or more items from each category in **Table 1**. Aim for a variety of fruits and vegetables to keep your lunches nutritious, colorful and interesting.

Whole grains _____

Protein _____

Vegetables _____

Fruits _____

Dairy _____

Table 1. Lunch ideas from each food group with average calories per serving.

Whole Grains	Protein	Vegetables	Fruits	Dairy
Whole-wheat bread (2 slices) 160 calories	Shredded chicken (½ cup shredded/ about 2 ounces) 90 calories	Red (tomato, etc.) (2 slices) 10 calories	Red (watermelon, etc.) (1 cup) 50 calories	Skim milk (1 cup/8 ounces) 90 calories
Brown rice (½ cup) 110 calories	Tuna (½ cup/about 3 ounces) 100 calories	Orange (carrots, etc.) (8 baby carrots) 30 calories	Orange (cantaloupe, orange, etc.) (1 cup cubed) 50 calories	Flavored skim milk (e.g. chocolate) (1 cup/8 ounces) 140 calories
Quinoa (½ cup) 110 calories	Kidney beans (½ cup/ about 1½ ounces) 110 calories	Yellow (pepper, etc.) (½ cup) 20 calories	Yellow (peach, etc.) (½ cup slices packed in juice) 70 calories	Low-fat mozzarella cheese (¼ cup shredded/ about 1 ounce) 65 calories
Barley (½ cup) 100 calories	Turkey pepperoni (17 pieces/1 ounce) 75 calories	Leafy greens (spinach, etc.) 1 cup 10 calories	Green (pears, etc.) (1 medium size) 100 calories	Cheddar cheese (1 ounce) 110 calories
Wild rice (½ cup) 80 calories	Turkey slices (3 slices/3 ounces) 90 calories	Nonleafy greens (celery, etc.) (4 small stalks)	Purple (plum, etc.) (1 medium size) 30 calories	Low-fat cottage cheese (½ cup) 80 calories
Bulgur (1 cup) 150 calories	Peanut butter (2 tablespoons) 190 calories	Purple (eggplant, etc.) (1 cup cubed) 35 calories	Blue (blueberries, etc.) (½ cup) 40 calories	Low-fat yogurt (1 cup/8 ounces) 150 calories
Popcorn, air popped (2 cups) 60 calories	Hard-cooked egg (1 egg) 80 calories	White (onion, etc.) (2 slices) 10 calories	White (banana, etc.) (1 medium size) 105 calories	Soy milk (non-dairy) (1 cup/8 ounces) 110 calories

Source of nutrition information: U.S. Department of Agriculture nutrient database.

For specific information about your choices, refer to the Nutrition Facts label on the food package.

For a variety of recipes, see our recipe database at www.ag.ndsu.edu/food (click on “Recipes”).

Julie Garden-Robinson, Ph.D., R.D., L.R.D., Food and Nutrition Specialist

Jayne Ericson, Dietetic Intern (former)

For more information about nutrition, food safety and health, visit this website:
www.ag.ndsu.edu/food

NDSU Extension does not endorse commercial products or companies even though reference may be made to tradenames, trademarks or service names.

For more information on this and other topics, see www.ndsu.edu/extension

County commissions, North Dakota State University and U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. NDSU does not discriminate in its programs and activities on the basis of age, color, gender expression/identity, genetic information, marital status, national origin, participation in lawful off-campus activity, physical or mental disability, pregnancy, public assistance status, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, spousal relationship to current employee, or veteran status, as applicable. Direct inquiries to Vice Provost, Title IX/ADA Coordinator, Old Main 100, 701-231-7708, ndsu.eoaa@ndsu.edu. This publication will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities upon request, 701-231-7881. w-9-15; w-8-19; w-7-24