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## **Eight Tips for Healthy, Happy Lunches**

(Interview with Jill West, author of 400 Moms)

by Elizabeth Talbot

As a private trainer and nutrition counselor, I know just how important it is for both adults and kids to eat healthy, nutritious lunches - and just how challenging it can be. With so many choices and conflicting messages about food, putting together healthy, tasty lunches can be a challenge. Many of my clients want tips and tricks to find easy, nutritious lunches that can be prepared day after day for both themselves and their kids. With the help of Jill West, Moraga Registered Dietitian and author of "400 Moms," I have put together eight tips for healthy lunches that you and your kids can be happy about.

### **Tip #1: Eat by Example**

Kids love to mimic what their parents do. If you eat nutritious, well balanced meals, your kids are more likely to do the same. Jill emphasizes that if you are enthusiastic about healthy foods, your kids will be enthusiastic about healthy foods, too. She also recommends being excited about trying new foods yourself. Don't feel guilty if you aren't eating as healthy as you could be, however. Jill recommends visualizing a healthy plate (i.e., half fruits/veggies, half grains and protein) and trying your best to accomplish that goal. Hopefully, your kids will follow suit with the food you feed them.

### **Tip #2: Include a Protein + Carbohydrate**

For the main lunch entree, Jill says the most important thing to focus on is that it's a protein/carbohydrate combination. Popular choices in her book include: PB & J sandwich, turkey sandwich, pasta with leftover chicken or meat, grilled cheese, quesadilla, rice cakes with peanut or almond butter, whole grain crackers and cheese, hard-boiled egg and wheat crackers, bean and cheese burrito, pita bread sandwich with almond butter and honey, chicken noodle soup with whole grain crackers, black beans and rice, cottage cheese with peaches or pineapple, cup of yogurt with Grape-Nuts cereal or low fat granola, and peanut butter and apple wrap. When I asked Jill if nut butters were a substantial protein source, she noted that if you choose them, be sure to include more protein at other meals.

### **Tip #3: Limit the Sweets - Uh Oh!**

Dessert can be tricky, because you don't want to teach bad habits, but if you stop your kids from having any dessert, it may push them to seek out sweets elsewhere. A better plan is to provide a reasonable amount of dessert. Jill recommends trying to keep portions for sweets to 150 calories or less and to work on teaching your kids how to judge what an appropriate serving size looks like. She further recommends having a goal of one dessert or less per day. Gauge how many desserts your child is getting elsewhere (i.e., school parties, play dates, etc.) to determine whether or not to pack one for their lunch or snack.

### **Tip #4: BYOL (Bring Your Own Lunch)**

For the busy parent, finding prepackaged lunch options or simply signing up for school lunches seems like a godsend. But are these options actually healthy? Despite the fact that schools in our

area are very good academically, the quality of food varies widely. Jill recommends checking with your child's school to see who their vendor is and if they participate in the National School Lunch Program. For prepackaged options, Safeway and Whole Foods carry the brand "Revolution Foods," from Oakland, which provides reasonably nutritious lunches if you find yourself in a bind. Jill does not recommend relying heavily on these two easy alternatives, though. They should be limited to once in a while to ensure that the food, especially the fruit, is as fresh and nutritious as possible.

#### **Tip #5: Get Your Kids Involved**

Children don't want to feel like "healthy foods" are being forced on them. When children are a part of the process, Jill notes that they "take ownership" and are more likely to eat what they're served. However, she says that it's also important for parents to provide structure around those choices. For example, she suggests offering two options such as, "Do you want apple slices or raisins in your lunch tomorrow?" Leaving the choices open-ended or offering too many choices can be more difficult for the child. Another suggestion Jill had has is make the Farmer's Market a family event. Let your kids pick out their fruits and vegetables for the week. It just may inspire a little more enthusiasm for eating healthfully. I always tell my clients to aim for a variety of colors in their fruit and veggie choices - this ensures getting the full range of vitamins and minerals. So have your kids do the same!

#### **Tip #6: Limit the Juice**

As you might expect, Jill does not recommend feeding your children juice boxes, if possible, because of the concentrated sugar they contain. Other options such as milk or water are superior. Milk provides many nutrients including protein, potassium, calcium and vitamin D, and water is best for keeping kids hydrated. In "400 Moms", Jill notes that 62% of nutrition experts interviewed reported serving juice three days or less per week and no more than 4 ounces per serving.

#### **Tip #7: Make the Whole Grain Plunge**

If sandwiches are a staple in your child's lunch, substituting whole wheat or whole grain bread for white bread can make a big difference in the nutrient content of the sandwich. You can also switch to whole wheat flour tortillas or pita bread and whole grain crackers for variety. There is not a large amount of nutritional value to white bread, and a small switch like this can make a big difference in your child's health.

#### **Tip #8: Include Healthy Sides & Snacks**

Here are some suggestions by Jill for additional side or snack items:

Dried fruit such as apricots, mango, raisins, blueberries, or cranberries; fruit salad; apple slices with peanut butter; applesauce or fruit cup (unsweetened); whole grain crackers; nuts such as almonds, peanuts, or pistachios; celery with peanut butter; nonfat yogurt; homemade trail mix; baby carrots, cucumbers, celery, bell peppers, or snap peas with homemade ranch dip; fruit slices dipped in vanilla or lemon yogurt; fruit leather; and pretzels.

Hopefully, these tips can help you provide healthier lunches for your children. Many thanks to Jill West for her help!

Jill West, RDN, is an accomplished speaker, author of the book, 400 MOMS, and the mother of three boys. She is a Registered Dietitian and Certified Health Coach with a private practice in Lafayette and is a columnist for Bay Area Parent magazine. For more information, please visit [www.400MOMS](http://www.400MOMS.com).

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