

# Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

## School lunch may be healthier than packed

### Generally, which is healthier for kids, a packed lunch or a school lunch?

Obviously, this could go either way, depending on the content of the actual meal. But according to at least one study, school meals might have a significant edge.

The research, published in 2014 in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, compared 1,314 lunches of preschool and kindergarten students in three schools in Virginia. About 43 percent of the lunches were packed lunches, and 57 percent were school lunches. Like most schools, the schools in this study participated in the National School Lunch Program, and the research was conducted after that program upgraded its nutrition standards in 2012-13.

The researchers found that packed lunches had more vitamin C and iron and less sodium than the school lunches, but the packed lunches were also higher in calories, fat, saturated fat and sugar and were lower in protein, fiber, vitamin A and calcium. Packed lunches were less likely to contain fruits, vegetables, unsweetened juice and milk and were more likely to include chips, crackers or other savory snacks, and sugar-sweetened beverages.

Although many kids balked when schools started serving healthier meals, a 2014 study in the journal *Childhood Obesity* found that 70 percent of elementary school leaders reported that students had warmed up to them.

According to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the trick to making sure your children's lunch is a healthy one is to make sure it provides a good balance: some lean protein, a whole grain, a fruit, a vegetable and a dairy product. Take a look at the school menu and talk with your children about what they like and don't like in the school lunches, or if they'd prefer to bring a lunch from



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home. If the school lunch doesn't appeal to your kids, talk with them once a week about what they'd like to carry with them. It's important to get kids' buy-in: No matter how nutritious a lunch is, it won't do any good if a child won't eat it.

The nutrition academy offers these ideas:

- Pack easy-to-eat foods: strawberries or an easy-to-peel tangerine instead of an orange, for example, or carrots, cherry tomatoes or bell pepper strips instead of a salad.
- For sandwiches or wraps, choose whole grain options and lean meat or cheese.
- Make it fun. Cut sandwiches into stars or other unusual shapes. Celebrate special days by packing an all-orange lunch for Halloween, for example, or an all-red lunch for Valentine's Day.
- Ask if your children trade food with friends at lunchtime. That will help you determine what foods they prefer.

For a beverage, consider packing a small bottle of water with lunch. Earlier this year, the Harvard School of Public Health reported that about half of children and teens aren't getting enough hydration, and nearly one-quarter don't drink any plain water at all. Children tend to think cold water tastes better than water at room temperature. Adding a frozen water bottle to your child's lunch pack will help keep the lunch cold and will thaw by lunchtime, providing a nice cool drink.

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**Editor:** This column was reviewed by Carolyn Gunther, Ohio State University Extension specialist in Community Nutrition Education.

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