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Packing a punch

The right lunchbox choices give kids a nutritional boost

By Sharon Thompson

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Advice to parents of school-age children: Don't be tempted by the pretty packaging.

Parents who are shopping today for food to pack in their children's lunch bags might be sidelined by the number of products designed for children. Food manufacturers know that children are influenced by food advertising and peer pressure, so it's up to parents to make sure lunch foods aren't being chosen simply because

Shrek's face is on the box or there's a riddle on the side.

Lexington dietitian Patti Geil suggests parents keep "Mother Nature knows best" in mind while choosing foods to send with their children to school.

"Sticking to the most basic, natural and nutritious food is far better for both your health and pocketbook than ready-to-eat, highly processed and expensive refined foods," Geil said. She is co-author with Tami Ross of several nutrition books and cookbooks, including *Cooking Up Fun for Kids With Diabetes*.

"Packing a school lunch is well worth the investment in time because it gives the family a bit more control over food choices at the midday meal. It's a great opportunity to encourage healthy food options.

"Prepackaged lunches may be convenient, but they are often higher in fat, salt, sugar and calories than meals that you prepare yourself, and they are also often more expensive," she said.

At a recent forum hosted by the Federal Trade Commission and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, several companies pledged to change how they market food to children. They agreed to focus advertising on foods that meet limits on calories, fats, salt and added sugars, and restrict use of licensed third-party characters only on foods meeting nutrition standards, according to the American Dietetic Association.

But for now, not all those kid-friendly drinks and foods are nutritionally sound.

As the school year gets under way, stores are positioning lunch and snack items in prominent spots, and we're seeing more of those 100-calorie packs, which many parents see as a simple way to control portions.

"A 100-calorie pack of cookies does control portion, but it doesn't control the amount of sweets," dietitian Janice Newell Bissex said in a telephone interview.

Bissex and Liz Weiss are registered dietitians and authors of *The Moms' Guide to Meal Makeovers: Improving the Way Your Family Eats, One Meal at a Time!* They share easy strategies and recipes for improving the family diet at www.MealMakeoverMoms.com.

School mornings are hectic, and grabbing a variety of pre-packaged items to throw into a lunchbox is fast. But there are better choices that are just as easy, Weiss said.

By following their recommendations, smart shoppers also can reap significant savings with a do-it-yourself approach to packing a lunch. Items such as homemade granola bars have more nutritional value when you control what's in them, Bissex said.

If your child has to have something sweet, give him or her a baggie filled with homemade trail mix. Weiss said, "It's just as easy to choose whole-grain and unsweetened cereal as it is to pick up a box of sugar-coated cereal."

Water

The most healthful choice of all. Small bottles are just right for little hands.

Juice

Make sure it's 100 percent fruit juice. The carton can be frozen to keep the lunchbox cool.

Smoothie

Yogurt and real fruit are blended for a wholesome drink.

FRUIT**apple**

Keep the skin on the apple for insoluble fiber and vitamin C.

Banana

If your child has a sweet tooth, this is better than a cookie.

Grapes

Red, black and green grapes will add a spot of color, as well as nutrients, to the lunch bag.

VEGETABLES**Broccoli and cauliflower**

Kids love "little trees." For cauliflower with a vivid yellow color, sautŽ it briefly with a spoonful of turmeric.

Dip for veggies

Add a little fun to the vegetables. Homemade dips can be placed in resealable containers.

Snow peas

This green vegetable provides a lot of crunch without the fat that's in a bag of chips.

PROTEIN AND BREAD**Whole-grain bagels**

Add peanut butter, tuna salad, chicken salad or sliced turkey and cheese.

String cheese

Pull-apart string cheese is fun for children and is packed with calcium.

Oat bran muffin

Make your own and sneak in grated carrots or crushed pineapple for extra nutrition.

TREATS**Whole-grain crackers**

Buy baked snacks in large containers and portion a handful in a plastic bag to save money.

Raisins

Dried fruit provides energy for active kids. Raisins have lots of phytochemicals.

Homemade trail mix

Make your own with your child's favorite sweet or savory ingredients.

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