LUNCH ASSESSMENT FINDINGS
World School Milk Day, September 2010

HEALTHY LUNCH = HEALTHY STUDENTS

Young minds need good food to perform their best; healthy choices at lunch give children the energy and nutrients they need to stay healthy, alert, and ready to learn through the school day. Nutrition has an impact on a child’s ability to think both short- and long-term. In the short-term, day-to-day lunch box choices can impact mental performance.

Well-meaning parents may be unwittingly doing more harm than good by giving into the peer pressure faced by their children to have “fun” foods that provide little in terms of nutritional value. For example, the well-marketed fruity gummies that have virtually no real fruit and are really just candy, or the popular lunch box packages of “peanut-free” cookies, brownies and potato chips.

In order to get the nutrients children need to optimize learning, the school lunch box should be packed with foods from at least three of the four food groups:

- Grain Products
- Vegetables and Fruit
- Milk and Alternatives
- Meat and Alternatives

Healthy lunch foods include wholesome foods such as whole grain breads, milk, fruit and lean meats or legumes that are filled with nutrients to fuel the brain throughout the school day.

THE ASSESSMENT

As part of the 2010 World School Milk Celebrations in Ontario, registered dietitian Shannon Crocker, went into four kindergarten classes to see if children are getting enough nutritious food to eat in their lunches. The schools, in Hamilton and Toronto, are part of the new Ministry of Education’s full day kindergarten program.

Parents in three of the four classes were not aware that a dietitian was coming to review the lunches. Parents in one class were notified in advance; the lunches in that classroom contained more vegetables and milk (albeit still a small
percentage), however, they also contained similar unhealthy items as seen in the other three classes.

It’s important to keep in mind that this lunch assessment provides just a snapshot of kids’ lunches. The reasons behind the lunch choices are not known; a child might not have enough nutritious food to eat in their lunch for a variety of reasons such as:

- The child just simply doesn’t eat a lot over the day so parents only send a little food
- The child is a really picky eater and so healthy choices are limited
- It was a hectic morning and time ran out on packing balanced lunches
- The family happened to be low on groceries this day
- The family doesn’t have enough money to buy nutritious foods
- The parents don’t know enough about healthy choices

Here are the results of the assessments, along with some simple solutions provided to parents to help make healthier lunch box choices.

MISSING TWO KEY FOOD GROUPS

Most lunches had enough Grain Products (mostly white bread and crackers, not whole grain) and a Meat or Alternative; luncheon meat sandwich (often bologna) was the most popular main meal item.

Vegetables & Fruits and Milk & Alternatives are the two most under-consumed food groups by Canadian children. Evidence of this was seen in the lunch box assessment. Milk and vegetables were found in a very limited number of lunches: 10% of all lunches had no fruit, no vegetable and no milk product.

No Milk or Milk Alternatives

Note: Both schools participate in the Elementary School Milk Program; neither school had started the program at the time of the assessment.

- Only 5 lunches (6%) contained milk – 4 of these were in the class that was aware we were coming; 94% of lunches had no milk to drink
- 43% of lunches had no milk or milk alternative at all
- 13% of lunches had a cheese string
- 15% of lunches had yogurt – primarily yogurt tubes

If a lunch did have a milk product – typically it was a cheese string or yogurt tube – which is not a full milk alternative serving.

Milk is a nutritious beverage packed with nutrients students need to thrive; Health Canada recommends that children include 2 servings of fluid milk each day.
Simple tips:

A healthy lunch box should contain at least one serving of milk or milk alternative.

• Join your school’s Elementary School Milk Program – and your child will have fresh, nutritious milk delivered every day. A simple way to boost nutrients at lunchtime.
• Buy reusable containers to refill with milk at home and pack in the lunch box. *
• Include cups of yogurt or cottage cheese with fruit as a snack.
• Make milk pudding (e.g. chocolate, vanilla, banana) and send in a small container as a dessert.
• Cut up cubes of Canadian cheddar cheese to be enjoyed with whole grain crackers.
• Add shredded cheese to a wrap or sandwich.

* Always make sure to pack an ice pack to keep all fresh, perishable foods chilled.

Missing Vegetables

• 85% of lunches had no vegetable
• On a positive note, 70% of lunches had a piece of fruit or fruit cup

Canada’s Food Guide recommends that school-age children need 5 to 6 servings from the Vegetables and Fruit group each day in order to get healthful plant compounds (e.g. antioxidants) and fibre. School lunch boxes should include 2 to 3 servings of vegetables and/or fruit.

Simple tips:

The challenge is to include vegetables that kids will eat. If your child always brings the veggies home uneaten, ask him/her why. Is it because they don’t like the choice or is it because they eat the treats first, then have no time to eat the veggies?

• Keep raw, cut veggies in the fridge, ready to pack in lunches.
• Send a little tasty dip along with raw veggies like hummus or roasted red pepper dip. Try different raw vegetables like crisp green beans, crunchy cauliflower, or peeled sweet potato.
• Let children help plan their lunch, including their favourite vegetable choices.
• Stuff celery with cheese.
• Add raw spinach and shredded carrot to wraps or sandwiches.
• Send warm vegetable soup or leftover vegetable stir-fry in an insulated container so that it stays hot.

Make sure to pack at least one serving of fruit along with the vegetables. Keep unsweetened applesauce, fruit cups, or dried fruit (e.g. raisins) in the cupboard for times when the fresh fruit runs out.

**POOR NUTRITIONAL VALUE**

Most lunches contained no vegetables, milk products or whole grains – healthy foods that are recommended for growing children. Many lunches were unbalanced nutritionally with processed foods high in fat and sodium and too many sugary treats.

Many main lunch items provided poor nutritional value, for example:

- Meat was typically processed luncheon meat (e.g. bologna) as well as cold processed nuggets, chunks of pepperoni, cold wieners – all foods that provide unhealthy amounts of sodium, fat and chemicals.
- Processed luncheon meat on white bread was the most popular main meal item; almost a quarter (23%) of lunches contained processed luncheon meat on white bread.
- Two lunches contained cold hot dogs; others had cold wieners without a bun.
- One lunch included two fried corn dogs with cold French fries (this lunch also contained cookies, Kool-Aid, applesauce and raisins).
- Six lunches had jam on white bread, which would provide sugar and refined carbohydrates but no protein to keep a child’s body and mind alert for longer.

Almost every lunch had at least one processed, sugary snack – like cookies, chocolate covered granola bars and pastries. Some lunches had up to five packaged treats.

- Almost ¾ of lunches (71%) had at least one sugary packaged snack
- 33% of lunches had at least two sugary packaged snack
- 32% included packaged cookies (Packaged cookies most common sugary packaged snack; several lunches had two different kids of cookies)
- 18% of lunches included at least 3 processed snacks

Several lunches had 4 or 5 treats as well as sugary fruit flavoured beverages; these lunches did not provide other nutritionally sound foods.

**Simple Tips**

- Switch from white bread to whole grain breads, tortillas, naan, or buns.
• Instead of processed luncheon meat, choose tuna, egg, hummus, black beans or leftover cooked chicken, ham or beef for sandwiches or wraps instead.
• Make life easy: send in hearty leftover stew, casserole, curry, or soup in an insulated container to keep it hot.
• Make your own lunch kit: pack whole grain crackers, cheese and cucumber slices so kids can make their own stackable snack. Add some roasted soy nuts and grapes to nibble on.

Kids don't need treats every day. If you want to send a treat, keep it to one a day. Some kid-pleasing, healthy snacks include:

• Yogurt
• Whole grain cereal bars
• Fresh fruit or fruit cups like unsweetened applesauce or fruit packed in its own juice
• Homemade mini muffins like oatmeal or carrot
• Dry cereal like frosted wheat squares (for fibre with a little bit of sweet).
• Unsalted pretzels or air-popped popcorn

Simple Tips

• Make a double-batch of cookies, mini muffins or cereal squares on the weekend and freeze them; take out one or two each day for lunch. Not only will it be less expensive than store-bought cookies, but also you can make healthier versions by reducing fat and sugar and increasing the fibre.
• Fresh fruit makes a simple snack. Cut up apple, peaches or pears sprinkled with a little lemon (to stop browning), berries and pre-peeled oranges or tangerines are easy to eat.
• Check the label on packaged fruit snacks – look on the label for ones that are real dried fruit with no added sugar (e.g. raisins, fruit leather). Fruit gummies are typically candies with a tiny amount of fruit concentrate; skip these foods.

POOR DRINK CHOICES

Poor beverage choices were found in many of the lunches.

• 51% of lunches had at least one sugary fruit flavoured beverage – which provides sugar, calories and little else.
• 33% of those lunches had 2 fruit flavoured drinks, punches, cocktails or Kool-Aid.
• Only 5 lunches contained milk, which provides nutrients to nourish a child’s body and brain through the school day.
• Many lunches had no drink at all or only 1 drink for the entire day.
Simple Tips:

- Join your school's Elementary School Milk Program – and your child will have nutritious fresh milk delivered every day.
- Send in at least two drinks. Choose from: milk, water or 100% juice. Choose milk and water most often.
- Look on juice boxes for “100% juice” and make sure there is no added sugar in the ingredients list.
- Avoid fruit-flavoured drinks (e.g. fruit punch) that provide a lot of added sugar and little, if any, real juice.
- Buy reusable containers to refill with milk, water or 100% juice – it will save money compared to store-bought juice boxes.

FOOD SAFETY CONCERNS

Lack of safe food packing was an unexpected finding.

- The majority of lunches were missing cooler packs: 92% were without a cooler pack.
- Several lunches included hot foods that were not in an insulated container to keep it hot – e.g. spaghetti and meat sauce in plastic containers. There were also no cooler packs to keep the food safe if the child liked to eat those leftovers cold.

Simple Tips

- Perishable food like meat, eggs, milk products must stay cold to stay safe. Keep food cold with an insulated lunch bag and always use freezer packs. Pick them up from the dollar store.
- Use an insulated container to keep hot foods hot (e.g. spaghetti, chili, baked chicken legs, soups and stews). Preheat the container first with boiling water – let it sit for a couple of minutes; pour out the water and add the hot food right away.