Plan Ahead for Healthy Lunch Choices

Eating a variety of healthy foods is important to an overall eating plan. Planning ahead helps to provide this variety. Just like with meals at home, planning is important for lunch as well. It is critical to staying out of the sandwich rut and incorporating a variety of healthy foods into your diet.

Deciding what to pack for lunch
Begin by making a list of foods to eat for lunch. Divide the list into food groups or into categories such as main dishes, side dishes, snacks and drinks. Here are some suggestions:

- **Grains:** Whole wheat, rye or raisin bread; Bagel; English muffin; Pita bread; Tortillas; Whole wheat crackers; Trail mix; Graham crackers; Popcorn; Pretzels
- **Milk:** String cheese; Cheese cubes; Yogurt; Cottage cheese; Low fat or fat free milk
- **Meat & Beans:** Lean sliced turkey or ham; Hard-boiled egg; Peanut butter; Chicken breast; Tuna or chicken salad; Nuts
- **Fruit:** Grapes; Unsweetened applesauce; Melon cubes or balls; Raisins and other dried fruit; Kiwi; Pineapple; Berries; 100% fruit juice
- **Vegetables:** Carrots; Celery; Broccoli; Cauliflower; Sugar snap peas; Cucumber spears; Cherry tomatoes

Once you have made a list of potential lunchtime foods, use the chart to plan the week's lunch menu. Try to include foods from at least four of the food groups each day and a variety of foods throughout the week.

Eating out for lunch?
Busy workdays create a demand for convenience and efficiency, and lunchtime is no different. One out of every three meals is eaten out with billions of dollars being spent in restaurants. However, these meals have the potential to contribute excess calories, fat and sodium in the diet while reducing the availability of fruits, vegetables and whole grain foods.

Select restaurants that offer salads, baked potatoes, vegetables whole grain breads and other healthy foods. Get a copy of the menu and plan what you will be eating ahead of time. Look for food preparation terms that indicate a healthy selection rather than sending warnings of foods high in fat, cholesterol and/or sodium.

Order more foods that are steamed, in its own juices, baked, broiled, roasted, grilled, poached, stir fried, fresh lean or garden fresh. Order less foods that are fried or batter fried, crispy, breaded sautéed, rich, scalloped, buttered, creamed, with pan gravy, basted with butter or margarine, cooked in creamy sauces or with hollandaise sauce.

Another strategy for enjoying your favorite restaurant foods while still eating healthy is to eat smaller portion sizes. Share an entrée with another diner. Ask for a “doggie bag” with your meal and put half of your meal inside before you begin eating. This puts a smaller portion on your plate as well as giving you lunch for tomorrow. Order items a la carte and order dressings and sauces on the side to reduce portion sizes. If you are eating from a buffet, look over the entire buffet before you begin making your selections.

Taking a little bit of time to plan ahead can help you make great nutritious lunch choices. Whether carrying your own lunch to work or eating out, healthful meals can be a part of your daily lunch hour.

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