

By Merilee Kern

Healthy School Lunch and Snack Solutions

BACK TO SCHOOL MEANS BACK TO GOOD NUTRITION BASICS

As parents prepare for yet another "back to school" season, they will scurry to malls in search of new clothes for their ever-growing child along with a litany of school supplies too numerous to name. But, let's not forget healthy school lunches and after-school snacks as we plan ahead for the upcoming school year.

Here are a few great ideas to assure a happy school day is also a healthy school day:

- Lean meat, such as shaved ham or turkey, on whole grain bread or in a wheat wrap with some lettuce, low/fat free cheese, and a touch of low-fat/fat-free mayonnaise or mustard is sure to please...and nourish.

- Even the quintessential children's sandwich, PB&J, can be made in a healthy way these days. Many peanut butter brands now offer low-fat and low-sodium versions. That, coupled with an all-fruit, sugar-free jelly on whole grain bread makes this school cafeteria staple a guiltless pleasure.

- Tuna fish is jam packed with oh-so-beneficial Omega-3 fatty acids. When mixed with low-fat mayonnaise, diced apple, and, if your child likes, a bit of onion and served in a wheat pita it's nothing short of delish and a healthy home run!

- BLTs can also be healthy! Simply swap regular bacon for the turkey bacon variety (in moderation due to high-sodium levels) and layer with lettuce, tomato, and fat-free mayonnaise. Sandwich in whole grain bread or roll into a pita wrap - your child will nary know the difference between this healthy version versus its fat-packed counterpart.

- What to serve on the side of the main school lunch item? Options abound! Low-salt pretzels; fat- and sugar-free yogurt or cottage cheese; celery sticks filed with low-fat/low-sodium peanut butter; any kind of pre-washed fresh fruit or dried raisins; apricots, pears, apples, roasted or raw almonds, walnuts or peanuts (not oiled or candied); low-fat string cheese or chunked low-fat cheese; and even baked chips or healthy pita chips in moderation are all great choices.

It's common knowledge that after school is prime time for snacking, and it is also a time when many kids make, shall we say, less than nutritious food and beverage choices. Ms. Kern offers these waistline-friendly

after school snack alternatives your kids are sure to love:

- Potato Chips/Fries - Cut the potato in the desired shape (round, rectangular, oblong, etc.). Fully coat with egg whites. Season with a touch of salt or other herbs as desired. Bake at 350 degrees until golden brown. Serve with sugar-free catsup.

- Popcorn: Air pop popcorn and on it drizzle a moderate amount of powdered butter substitute, light parmesan cheese, or even honey for a tasty twist.

- Pizza: On a fat-free/low-calorie/low-carb whole grain tortilla (or whole grain bagel), smear tomato paste or sauce and top with fat-free cheese, whatever veggies the child likes, and even lean meats like ham or turkey dices. Bake at 350 degrees until cheese is melted with a few brown spots on top.

- Tortilla Chips: Cut Chinese wonton squares (usually found in the produce aisle) in half diagonally so they become triangles. Spread out evenly on a baking sheet, lightly spray with cooking spray, and sprinkle on a dash of salt. Bake at 350 degrees until crunchy. Eat alone or serve with fat-free salsa or the below-described Mexican bean dip.

- Mexican Bean Dip: Drain and food process two 14-ounce cans of black beans. Add 3/4 cup of fat-free salsa and 1/2 tablespoon of Worcestershire sauce and blend until completely smooth. Top with a dab of fat-free sour cream, fat-free cheese, diced tomatoes, chopped green onions, etc. as desired.

- Fruit Smoothies: These are a warm weather staple that can, and should, be enjoyed year-round. While fruit smoothie recipes abound, it need not be a complex process. Simply blend, in amounts to your personal liking, either plain or flavored fat-free/sugar-free yogurt with skim milk, ice cubes, and either fresh or frozen fruit chunks. For added sweetness, you can add a touch of honey or an artificial sweetener, such as stevia. Blend and enjoy!

- Parfait: While the word "parfait" may not be in your child's vocabulary, (s)he will love making - and eating - this snack layered with goodness. In a cup or bowl, simply create thin, alternating layers of non-fat yogurt, low-fat granola (or other heart-healthy cereal product), and fruit slices or whole berries. Make as many layers of each as you like and then dig in!



Children's health advocate, health industry veteran and two-time fitness champion, Merilee Kern, is the creator of the ground-breaking "Kids Making Healthy Choices" APP for children, parents/caregivers and educators (available on iTunes), which is based on her award-winning, illustrated fictional children's book, "Making Healthy Choices - A Story to Inspire Fit, Weight-Wise Kids." She may be reached online at: www.KidsMakingHealthyChoices.com.