

## It's about health and wellness: Meal ideas as students get ready to go back to school

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Bloom

August is National Back to School Month, which seems appropriate since schoolchildren across the nation are heading back to in-person learning. That noise you heard was the collective sigh of relief from those children, their parents and teachers. It has been a long time coming.

With back to school comes the question of what to do about breakfast, lunch and after-school snacks for all those children. After approximately 17 months since many children have been in the classroom, it is hard to remember what a school breakfast, lunch or snack might look like. Many children participate in the federal Free and Reduced Meal Program, which provides a free or reduced-cost lunch and breakfast to students in Oregon schools.

Mornings can be hectic, and the last thing children and their parents need or want to think about is what to make for breakfast or lunch (if children pack a lunch to school). Everyone needs something easy, fast and yet, nutritious.

Here are some ideas: A toasted, whole wheat English muffin with peanut butter or hummus (a spread made with garbanzo beans), plus a piece of fresh fruit (a banana or some grapes) or a glass of 100% fruit juice, is one idea. The English muffin can be substituted with a piece of whole wheat toast. Another quick breakfast is a bowl of cold cereal (100% whole grain is best) with fruit or juice. Low-fat or fat-free yogurt, coupled with a piece of fruit and toast is also quick and easy. A whole wheat bagel

smear with peanut butter or hummus, is portable and nutritious. Hard-boiled eggs, kept in a bowl in the refrigerator, are a handy breakfast item.

Breakfast should include a protein source and a source of complex carbohydrates. The complex carbohydrates (as opposed to the simple carbohydrates of a donut, or sugar-added cereal) take longer to break down in the body and provide a longer and steadier source of energy so a person does not get hungry so soon after eating. This helps to avoid that “crash” feeling at 10 a.m. and the need to eat long before the noon meal is available.

Just about anything can be turned into a breakfast including leftovers, such as soups, stews, even leftover pizza warmed in the microwave. A tortilla, either whole wheat or corn, can be spread with refried beans and cheese, topped with a little salsa and warmed in the microwave, then once wrapped in aluminum foil it becomes a quick, portable breakfast. The point is something for breakfast is better than nothing for breakfast, even if it is a nontraditional breakfast food.

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But what do you, as a parent, do if your child is one of those children who doesn't want to — or can't — eat breakfast first thing in the morning? Some people can't imagine eating breakfast before 10 a.m. This is where eating breakfast at school is a good option, since breakfast is served a little later in the morning.

Sometimes one needs to think outside the box ... the cereal box, that is, and get creative. Macaroni and cheese may not seem like a breakfast food, but it goes down well and contains a lot of calcium and protein that can sustain a child through until lunch, and it is kid friendly. Fruit smoothies are also quick and easy. Both options can be made using gluten free pasta, and can be made using dairy-free ingredients, for those with food sensitivities or allergies.

Lunches can also be just as easy as breakfasts. How many of us can say we grew up eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, AKA, PBJs for lunch? PBJs can also be a breakfast staple and a snack food.

With a little advanced preparation, sandwiches such as tuna or egg salad, or cheese with sliced avocados and lettuce and a little mayo, are simple and nutritious. Make sandwich fillings the night before and assemble sandwiches in the morning to avoid

soggy lunches. Lettuce acts as a barrier between the bread and the filling. Presliced lunch meats such as roast beef are quick to put together in a sandwich.

Again, leftovers can be turned into lunches — soups or chili in a thermos, a salad with dressing on the side, topped with a little chopped chicken, bacon or seasoned ground beef, etc. Whole wheat crackers and cheese, with fruit and milk, is also an appropriate lunch. Raw vegetables such as baby carrots, celery, cherry tomatoes and jicama, with low-fat ranch dressing, are a good way to get an extra serving of vegetables into children.

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After-school snacks can be variations on the lunch and breakfast themes — yogurt with fruit, cheese and crackers, etc. can help stave off hunger until the evening meal and keep blood sugar steady, which can help students focus on homework. Smoothies are a quick and easy snack that students can usually make themselves. Smaller children can learn to make smoothies with adult supervision. Smoothies made with frozen fruit, milk and yogurt are a refreshing end to the school day.

Students with food sensitivities can still enjoy the snacks and meals their friends enjoy. For a gluten-free snack, try gluten-free crackers. Sandwiches can be made with gluten-free bread, too. For the lactose-intolerant student, almond milk for a smoothie is an option as are cheeses and yogurts made without dairy products. If you have time on the weekends, quick breads (e.g., banana or zucchini) and muffins can also be made with gluten-free products and frozen for use during the week. These are easy and are often a child's first introduction to cooking.

If you are looking for homemade snacks, granola or do-it-yourself trail mix are choices, too. Trail mix can be tailored to children's tastes and is easy for them to make on their own, as a family or with friends. Made with oats (these can be gluten free, also), nuts and dried fruit, it provides a serving of whole grain, nuts (any kind will do) and dried fruit (try raisins, dried apricots or dried cranberries). As with any meal item, take into consideration food allergies (peanuts, soy, dairy, etc.) and choking hazards with small children when choosing snack or meal food items.

For more information, recipes, tips and ideas for back-to-school meals and snacks, visit [www.foodhero.org](http://www.foodhero.org).

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