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Cedars-Sinai Medical Center expert serves up the skinny on healthy and fun school lunches

LOS ANGELES (July 9, 2008) – In the battle against childhood obesity, the best way to defend your children against the fat-filled foods and sugary sweets lurking at school is to arm them with a healthy lunch made at home.

To prepare your children for all the options that will face them at school – from offerings in the cafeteria lunch line to vending machines and a la carte programs – remember that good eating habits start at home, said Netty Levine, R.D., a registered dietitian at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

“Kids spend most of their day in school,” Levine said. “The only way to make sure that they’re going to eat right is to help them pack their own healthy meal.”

Childhood obesity is one of the nation’s top health concerns. The percentage of children who are obese has more than doubled since 1980 – and among adolescents the rates have more than tripled, according to the Centers for Disease Control. This puts children at greater risk of Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease.

In addition to following common-sense nutrition guidelines – serving up a balance of fruits and vegetables, lean protein, calcium-rich dairy foods and whole grains – get children involved if you want them to learn healthy habits. Ask them to help pack their lunches. Let them make some of the choices the next time you’re browsing the grocery store produce department or local farmer’s market. And don’t forget a couple of important ingredients: creativity and fun.

“Let them play with their menus and experiment with new fruits and vegetables,” Levine said. “The lunch your child totes to school should be an extension of the good nutrition and meal planning that happens in your home every day.”

Six tips for healthy school lunches:

- **Start off right.** The first step to a healthy lunch is a balanced breakfast. Eating breakfast will help kids focus on their lessons and keep them from being ravenous by lunchtime. Even a bowl of low-sugar cereal and some fruit will do.
- **Keep it fun.** Healthy eats are more appealing to the appetite when they’re appealing to the eye. Try cutting a turkey, chicken or tuna sandwich into shapes with a cookie-cutter for the little ones. Offer wraps made with whole wheat pita to work some grains into your children’s diets. A cold salad of whole wheat corkscrew pasta, lean chicken or turkey,

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colorful and crunchy veggies with light dressing fits lots of food groups into lunch in a fun way.

- **Keep it cold.** That healthy sandwich could go uneaten if it's wilted by lunchtime. Try thermal-lined lunch boxes with a freezer pack. Or, freeze a box of milk, small bottle of water or juice to include in the lunch box – they'll melt by meal time and keep the other food cold.
- **Keep healthy snacks at hand.** Help your child ward off hunger until lunchtime with tasty good-for-you snacks. Consider grapes and other fruit, reduced-fat peanut butter spread on celery, cereal, and trail mixes packed with healthy nuts and seeds.
- **Keep it easy.** Fruits and vegetables are more likely to be eaten when they're bite-sized. Cut up fruit like apples – especially for children who are losing teeth. Miniature bell peppers and other small vegetables are also good choices.
- **Keep some "splurges" in the mix.** Every kid is going to want some chips and candy sometimes – and these foods are fine in moderation. Levine suggests matching the portions to your child's age. For example, nine chips for your nine-year-old or seven jelly beans for your seven-year-old.

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