

“CUT LUNCHTIME COST BY BROWN BAGGING IT”

After surviving the holiday shopping frenzy, one of your New Year’s resolutions might have been to tighten up when it comes to spending. If so, one of the easiest ways to stick to that resolution is to pack your own lunch each day.

The average person goes out to eat for lunch twice a week. A lunch typically costs at least \$5.00, so you are looking at \$10.00 a week, or over \$500 a year.

The following are a few tips for packing a well thought-out sack lunch that can not only save you money, but also provide nutritional benefits.

Saving money.

- Because single servings of items (for example, dried fruit, chips, baby carrots) can get expensive when purchased at the store, make your own by purchasing these items in bulk and packaging them yourself in snack-sized, self-sealing bags. Pack enough for a whole week to save money and time.
- Make large batches of soups and stews and freeze in portion-size containers for future lunches.
- At the grocery store, look at the unit price to make sure a “special” is really a bargain.
- Buy only the amount of food that can be used in a reasonable amount of time. Wholesale clubs and bulk items are a good way to save money provided the food doesn’t go to waste before it is eaten.

Keeping your lunch nutritious.

A nutritious lunch should contain:

- Bread or cereal (bread, tortillas, bagels, cornbread, pita bread, crackers, pasta, rice, pretzels and popcorn).
- Fruits and/or vegetables (fresh fruit that is easy to carry, sliced fruit such as melon and cantaloupe, raw vegetables with low-fat dressing, and vegetables on sandwiches).
- Protein (lean meats, fish, chicken, peanut butter, nuts, seeds, low-fat cheese, yogurt, legumes, and hard cooked eggs).
- Beverage (milk, juice or water).

When it comes to proteins, think outside the run-of-the-mill sandwich. You can find lots of protein in leftover casseroles, pizza, soups, chili and other meat dishes, especially if you have the means to store them safely and are able to reheat them to an internal temperature of 165 degrees (or until steaming hot or boiling).

Also, dessert is not a necessary component, but most people find it a nice way to finish lunch. If you want something sweet at lunchtime, try fresh fruit, graham crackers, vanilla wafers or oatmeal-raisin cookies.

Don't skimp on safety.

- Wash hands and preparation surfaces before and after food preparation.
- Keep lunch boxes clean by washing them after each use.
- Keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot. Frozen gel packs and insulated lunch boxes and thermoses can help.
- Discard all perishable foods after lunch unless you have a way to keep them at a safe temperature.
- Lunches that require refrigeration should be refrigerated as soon as you arrive at work so foods are not kept at unsafe temperatures for more than two hours.
- If lunches are carried in paper bags, use only bags designed for lunches. Use the bag only once.
- Before filling a thermos with hot foods, rinse with boiling water.

If you don't have an insulated lunch box or the means to refrigerate your lunch, here is a list of foods that can be packed safely without refrigeration:

- Peanut butter
- Pretzels, popcorn, crackers
- Nuts and seeds
- Fresh fruit and vegetables
- Dried fruit
- Canned and bottled juices
- Jam, jelly and honey
- Unopened cans of fruit and pudding
- Breads, bagels and English muffins
- Canned meat, poultry and fish that can be opened and eaten right away

Time-saving strategies

- Have a designated spot in the refrigerator to store lunches.
- Prepare sandwiches the night before. Pack lettuce and tomato in a separate container and put them on the sandwich just before eating. This will keep the sandwich from getting soggy.
- Cut up vegetables and place them in individual containers or plastic bags at the start of the week. That way, all you have to do is grab and go.
- When storing leftovers after dinner, pack a portion in a separate container for lunch the next day. Put that container in the "lunch" section of the refrigerator.

Shelia Lewis is a Smith County Extension agent in family and consumer sciences. She can be reached at 903/535-0885 or via e-mail at sk-lewis@tamu.edu.

Educational information/programs of Texas Cooperative Extension are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age or national origin.