

Fun Gluten-free School Lunches

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Packing school lunches that offer variety and that your kids will actually eat can be challenging. If you have celiac children, the problem is compounded because you need to pack a lunch that's 100% gluten-free (no wheat, rye, barley, malt or spelt) yet is still fun to eat. Even picky eaters are more likely to eat what you've packed if it's a fun lunch. It's also more likely they'll eat their lunch if they help to make and pack it. With a little pre-planning, your task is limited only by your ingenuity.

First, no matter what the age of your celiac children, educate them about their diet restrictions. Remind them daily that they can't trade foods with friends.

MICROWAVE LUNCHES

Explain your child's needs to the school's kitchen staff, stressing the need to avoid any cross contamination. Ask if they can warm your child's foods in their microwave oven. If permission is granted, place foods in a container or wrap them in wax paper so they can be placed in the microwave without fear of cross contamination. To prevent spoilage, freeze your lunchable containers so frozen packages are put in the lunchbox in the morning; by noon, they'll be thawed and ready to heat. You can make your own "lunchables" from dinner leftovers. If you're making mashed potatoes for dinner, bake the potatoes (instead of boiling them); remove most of the inside to make the mashed potatoes, leaving the skins intact. Then make your own potato skins topped with cheddar cheese and crumbled bacon. Potato skins make a fun lunch for kids. Other fun microwavable lunches include calzones (or "Hot Pockets") made from Chebe bread, or a hot dog topped with American cheese and wrapped in a corn tortilla (wrapped in wax paper to heat in the microwave), gluten-free tamales, Quesadillas, or pizza all add variety to lunch and can be warmed easily in the microwave. Put sloppy joe meat in a container to be heated at noon, and send along a gluten-free hamburger bun. Pork and beans with hot dog slices, sausage in barbecue sauce, gluten-free pasta with marinara sauce or macaroni and cheese are other great microwavable options.

COLD LUNCHES

To keep foods from spoiling, add an ice pack to the lunchbox. The variety of cold lunches is endless. For entrees, pack baked or fried chicken or chicken wings (made with a gluten-free coating), or cherry tomatoes stuffed with tuna fish. If you prefer sandwiches made on gluten-free bread, break the routine of deli lunchmeats with meatloaf, egg salad, or Reuben sandwiches. Any sandwich cut with a large cookie cutter is more fun to eat than a sandwich that's just cut in half. Using a cookie cutter also eliminates the crusts, which makes the sandwich look special. Use fun cookie cutters like an elephant, dinosaur, or gingerbread man. If you don't want to use bread... no problem. Wrap lunchmeat around a piece of string cheese. Skewered food is fun food. Let your child select what he wants to thread onto a toothpick-- cubed lunchmeat, cubed cheese, chunks of green pepper, pineapple chunks, olives, pickle slices, cherry tomatoes, orange slices... the choices are unlimited.

SALADS

Salads make a perfect cold lunch, whether it's chicken, ham, potato or egg salad. Kids love pasta salad; using gluten-free macaroni, add cut up veggies to make the salad more nutritious. Kids are more likely to eat cottage cheese if you fold in some chopped fruit (pineapple or peaches are especially good).

ESCAPE FROM BREAD

There are other viable sandwich containers besides bread. Corn tacos are a crisp, fun holder for a multitude of fillings. A taco lunch will be the envy of their friends. In a divided container, pack shredded cheese, lettuce, salsa, and shredded rotisserie chicken -- Don't forget to include the corn taco shell. Gluten-free tortillas make great wraps. Spread your child's favorite sandwich filling on a rice tortilla, roll it up, then slice it into smaller pieces creating circles. Even pancakes and crepes make wonderful wraps. If you pack a peanut butter and jelly sandwich made with gluten-free waffles instead of bread, it's guaranteed that lunch will be a hit! -- Or get even more daring and replace the jelly with slices of banana or apple slices drizzled with honey. Belgium lettuce leaves are shaped like little boats and make a fun holder for tuna or chicken salad. Kids love cracker sandwiches, especially when you layer the crackers with lunchmeat, cheese, and add a surprise like sliced black olives or sliced sweet pickles. A smiley face is easy to create by first spreading a rice cake with peanut butter. Make a smiley face using raisins or any cut up dried fruit. Add a full head of hair with coconut flakes-- color the coconut with food coloring to add to the fun factor. Occasionally avoid the bread or wrap altogether and pack gluten-free muffins instead.

ADD VARIETY

Variety is the key. Switch foods and alter combinations to make lunch an event of anticipation. One day pack deviled eggs; the next day pack celery sticks filled with peanut butter. If time is a factor, add no-fuss items like a small container of applesauce, gelatin cups, or flavored yogurt; or pack a few gluten-free crackers to have with cheese slices or to spread with hummus. Kids like small things that fit in their hands, so send one or two miniature gluten-free muffins with a hardboiled egg, sweet pickle, ham and cheese cubes, and a small container of cole slaw.

Trail mix is a favorite with kids and it can be varied from week to week, including options like dried fruits, Chex cereals, mini chocolate chips, mini marshmallows, nuts, gluten-free pretzels, or even popcorn. In a recent survey, it was found that kids love to find granola packed in their lunches -- so make up some gluten-free granola to have on hand. If using oats in your granola, make sure they are "pure" oats processed in a dedicated facility. (Creamery Hill offers pure oat products.).

KIDS LOVE TO DIP

Kids love to dip foods. Use cookie cutters to cut rice tortillas. Bake the cut outs at 400 degrees for about 6 minutes or until crisp. Send along bean dip or salsa for dipping. Pack carrot, celery, and green pepper strips with a ranch dressing for dipping, or string cheese and rolled lunchmeat slices with a honey mustard dressing for dipping.

For a dipping dessert, cut a rice tortilla with cookie cutter. Brush with a very small amount of olive oil then sprinkle with cinnamon sugar and bake at 400 degrees for about 6 minutes or until crisp; pack a container of applesauce for dipping. Send a few gluten-free sugar or shortbread cookies with a small container of flavored yogurt for dipping. Cut up fruit and toss it with pineapple juice (to prevent browning), then pack some caramel topping, or cream cheese mixed with nondairy whipped topping for dipping. Bake meringue cookies in the shape of bread sticks, then pack a container of pudding for dipping.

DESSERTS

Sure, you could pack fruit cups or a piece of fresh fruit, or gluten-free cookies or cupcakes, but dessert can be more ingenious than that. Mandarin Orange Salad or Waldorf Salad makes a refreshing dessert. Or make stacked apple slices (dipped in pineapple juice) filled with layers of

peanut butter and honey. Core an apple and fill it with peanut butter, miniature marshmallows, and raisins. Air-popped popcorn is a hit, especially when you mix in a few chocolate covered raisins. When you're short on time, you can toss a gluten-free protein bar into the lunch bag.

ANOTHER FUN IDEA--

Pack by color for holidays. For Halloween, consider black bean chili with gluten-free crackers, shredded carrots with raisins, bat-shaped cheddar cheese slices, a small bag of dried apricots and chocolate covered almonds, and orange juice to drink. Add a Halloween napkin for a finishing touch. Valentine's Day will be red foods. Patriotic holidays will be red, white, and blue foods.

Don't forget to add a funny note or draw a picture on the napkin. These little touches help to make lunch a time to look forward to for your child.