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FUN, FILLING, BUT NOT FATTENING – THE SKINNY ON MAKING YOUR KIDS A GREAT SCHOOL LUNCH

LOS ANGELES, August 21, 2003 – With the beginning of Fall just around the corner, parents are already gearing up to get their kids ready to start the school year. But once they start, parents are often challenged with how to ensure that their children eat healthy lunches that don't pack on the pounds while they are there. This presents a definite dilemma given that 15 percent of children and teens today are overweight, putting them at higher risk for developing Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and ultimately, heart disease.

"The percentage of obese children has nearly doubled in the last 20 years," said Netty Levine, R.D, a registered dietitian at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. "And, given that kids spend most of their day in school, the only way you can ensure that that they're going to eat healthfully is to help them pack a lunch from home."

Although schools have improved the nutritional value of lunches in the last decade, the meals still contain more fat than the government recommends. Further, many schools have added vending machines *and a la carte* programs, which do not have to meet the nutritional standards set by the U.S. government.

"Given these temptations, it can be a challenge for parents to provide food choices that kids will want to eat. That's why I suggest involving children in helping to prepare their lunch," says Levine. "It can be fun and teaches them how to choose foods that are tasty and low in fat."

The following are some ways to help ensure your kids are eating healthy at school:

1. Make sure your child eats a healthy breakfast. Eating prior to going to school will help kids from being too hungry before lunch, so that they want to eat more. "Make sure your kids have enough time to get ready for school and eat breakfast," cautions Levine. "A quick breakfast can be a bowl of a low sugar cereal, such as oatmeal or cheerios and fresh fruit."
2. Teach your child that her or his bagged lunch needs to include foods from five food groups:
 - **Protein:** Try meats lower in fat and cholesterol, such as chicken, turkey, tuna, or lower fat luncheon meats. For young children, you may want to cut lunch meat sandwiches into different shapes using a cookie cutter. Lower fat peanut butter can also be used on sandwiches.

-- **Grains:** Try rolls, pita bread, lahvash for wraps, breadsticks, rice cakes, crackers or tortillas. Whenever possible, select the whole wheat version. If your child will eat cold pasta salad, add low fat meat or veggies with light a salad dressing.

-- **Vegetables:** Try adding tomato and lettuce to your child's sandwich, or, for appeal add colorful cut-up veggies in baggies such as cherry tomatoes, red, yellow, and green peppers, or baby carrots.

-- **Fruits:** It's best to give your child fresh fruit that she or he likes, first. The second choice would be to use canned fruit in its own juice, or actual juice, such as that in juice packs. "Fruit has fiber and fills kids up, so that they want to eat less during the day," said Levine. "Juice, however, has the same calories as soda, so it should be served less often."

-- **Dairy:** Try lowfat or non-fat milk, non-fat chocolate milk, lowfat cheese, any type of cottage cheese or yogurt with fruit.

3. Pack lunches into a thermal lined lunchbox that includes a freezer pack to keep food refrigerated. "Another alternative would be to use boxes of milk, small bottles of water, or juice that have been frozen in advance to keep foods cold, as they will have defrosted by lunch time," said Levine.
4. Provide morning or afternoon snacks for kids to help prevent them from getting hungry and wanting more than is in their lunch. Keep these bagged and ready in the refrigerator. These would include:
 - lower fat peanut butter and celery
 - nuts/seeds and trails mixes (nuts are a healthy fat and can be used in moderation)
 - grapes, cherries, pineapple pieces, pears and apples
 - dried cereals
 - pretzels
 - fat-free pudding
 - graham crackers
6. Keep snacks that are higher in fat and calories to a minimum, so the child does not feel deprived. "For example, if your young child wants potato chips and candy, give him both, but limit the number of each to the child's age, like seven chips and seven M & M's," says Levine.

"Emphasizing healthy food choices and involving children in the lunch preparation process, can help them find foods that they enjoy without excessive fat, sugar, and calories," adds Netty Levine. "Healthy lunch choices can be a carry-over from healthy menu and meal planning at home."

Cedars-Sinai offers a variety of classes and programs designed to meet the needs of individuals of all ages as they seek to improve and maintain their health. Experienced registered dietitians, all of whom are members of the American Dietetic Association, lead these programs. Cedars-Sinai also offers special programs and classes for people with medical problems who need a special diet. Sessions are devised to assist in the treatment of conditions such as cancer, cholesterol control, diabetes, eating disorders, food allergies, heart disease, high blood pressure, kidney disease, malnutrition, osteoporosis, pediatric s, pregnancy, special meals for athletes, weight loss and weight gain.

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