

Snack attack!

BACK-TO-SCHOOL TIME BRINGS WITH IT AFTER-SCHOOL-SNACK TIME. HELP YOUR STUDENTS SKIP SODAS AND JUNK FOOD AND MAKE SOME SMARTER CHOICES.



MARY WAITE IS PREPARED for the moment when her three school-age boys drop their backpacks and storm the house. "We have a big fruit bowl that always has stuff in it," the St. Cloud, Minnesota, mother of four says. When afternoon hunger hits, the kids pick from sensible options such as fresh fruit, granola bars and low-fat animal crackers. "They feel like they're making the choice," Mary says.

Nurturing healthy snack choices and reasonable portion sizes during childhood is increasingly important as statistics show the effects of too much soda, junk food, super-size meals and sedentary activities.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the percentage of overweight children ages 6 to 11 has steadily increased since the 1970s. The CDC says that many overweight children grow up to be overweight or obese adults, with an increased risk of serious conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and stroke.

Snack choices can be as important as what kids eat for their main meals, according to Susan Moores, a registered dietitian in St. Paul, Minnesota, and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. "Don't think, 'It's just a snack,'" she says.

A mom to three teens, Susan knows parents can't force kids to eat what they don't want. But they can be good role models through their own eating habits and by stocking the kitchen with nutritious snacks.

GOOD (AND GOOD-FOR-YOU) SNACKS

Snacks are a great way for kids to meet their daily nutritional needs while satisfying hunger mid-morning or after school. Here are ways to meet cravings for sweet, salty or crunchy:

SNACK MIX made with a combination of a fortified, low-sugar cereal; dried fruit; nuts and pretzels

GRANOLA or other kid-friendly and nutritious breakfast cereal topped with yogurt

FRESH FRUIT topped with vanilla low-fat yogurt and a sprinkle of cinnamon

FRUIT CUPS with a mix of colorful options refrigerated in individual servings

FRUIT SMOOTHIES made with fresh or frozen fruit, yogurt and a splash of milk or juice

FROZEN BANANAS or 100-percent juice bars

YOGURT in frozen tubes

WHOLE-WHEAT CRACKERS topped with your kid's favorite low-fat cheese

HUMMUS served with toasted pita bread chips, or whole wheat or rye crackers

GRAHAM CRACKERS dipped in applesauce

BEAN DIP warm or chilled with tortilla chips

QUESADILLAS made with low-fat cheese inside whole wheat tortillas

RICE CAKES topped with peanut butter or other kinds of nut butters

PEANUT BUTTER and jelly on wheat bread, cut into fun shapes with cookie cutters

ENGLISH MUFFINS, split, toasted and topped with pizza sauce and some shredded low-fat cheese

APPLE WEDGES double dipped, first in flavored yogurt, then in granola-style cereal

BRAN MUFFINS spread with peanut butter or reduced-fat cream cheese



Snacktime Safari Dip

One of the biggest nutritional challenges can be getting kids to eat their fruits and vegetables. Most eat three servings a day (often iceberg lettuce, fries and orange juice) rather than the recommended five to nine, Susan says.

To boost the popularity of fruits and vegetables, explore your grocer's produce section, a farmer's market or a local orchard—all interactive ways to get the entire family excited about eating fresh new varieties. Since little ones likely won't grasp a lecture on vitamins, keep it easy. Emphasize the need to eat several colors a day, such as green grapes, orange carrots, yellow bananas and red tomatoes.

Convenience is key. Buy healthy, single-serving snacks and drinks. Package ready-to-eat produce in plastic bags. (Add lemon or orange juice to prevent fruit from browning.) Fill small containers with sweet or savory low-fat dips. Keep a small, stocked cooler in your vehicle during busy days to reduce the temptation for oversize sodas and fast food.

Not only are healthy pre-portioned snacks easy to take to school, day care and on-the-go activities, they also help kids grasp how much is reasonable to eat or drink between meals. (For example, only 4 to 6 ounces of juice—less than a cup—counts as one serving of fruit.)

Lessons like these make snacks a positive addition to your child's diet and teach smart food selection, which has benefits that last a lifetime. ■

By Lisa Meyers McClintick.

SNACKTIME SAFARI DIP

This fast, fun celery snack adds more fruit and veggies to your family's diet. Start to finish: 10 minutes

- ½ of an 8-ounce package reduced-fat cream cheese (Neufchâtel), softened
- ½ cup creamy peanut butter
- 2 to 3 tablespoons milk
- 2 teaspoons honey
- Celery sticks, animal crackers, and/or assorted dippers such as peeled jicama sticks, carrot sticks, apple wedges, pear wedges or graham cracker sticks

1. For the dip: In a small mixing bowl, beat the reduced-fat cream cheese with an electric mixer on medium speed till the cream cheese is smooth. Beat in the creamy peanut butter, milk and honey till the mixture is well combined and smooth. If you like, chill the peanut butter dip in the refrigerator before serving.

2. For the safari touch, spread the peanut butter dip in celery sticks and garnish with animal crackers and cut-up fresh fruit. Or serve the dip in a bowl with assorted dippers.

Makes twenty 1-tablespoon servings (1¼ cups).

Note: For an after-school snack, leave a note on the kitchen table leading kids to the dip and dippers waiting side by side in the fridge.

Nutrition facts per 1 tablespoon dip with the dippers: 65 cal, 5 g fat, 4 mg chol, 59 mg sodium, 4 g carbo, 1 g fiber, 2 g pro.