

Five Tips to Liven Up Lunch

It's back to school season, and for many, that means packing lunches for (or with) our kids. It's also a great time to think about upgrading our own lunch choices. DIY lunches might take more time than ordering from your desk or home, but it is a lot less expensive and, more importantly, lets you control your own ingredients and portions. It's much easier to meet your health goals with food you prepare yourself.

Here are 5 ways to give your BYO lunch a delicious, nutritious makeover.

1. Bring back the food thermos.

If you like hot lunch but don't want to fuss, consider using a thermos. Think beyond soup -- hot food containers are perfect for stews, chili, pasta, rice and beans, casseroles, pilafs, roasted veggies, gratins, stir fries, and curries. Cook extra dinner the night before for a zero-effort lunch the next day.



2. Think in building blocks.

If you need some creative inspiration, follow a logical formula for putting the perfect lunch together. Start with some sort of protein source like beans, tofu, or cooked fish, add a healthy source of complex carbohydrates (leftover brown rice, buckwheat noodles, sweet potato, or whole grain tortilla), and raw or cooked vegetables. Season your creation with something simple, like jarred salsa, pesto, tomato sauce, a bit of BBQ rub, a spice blend, nuts and seeds, or lemon and olive oil.



Plan ahead and create something amazing.

3. Go bento style.

Not just for kids, bento boxes come in various sizes and styles, including those that keep individual foods hot or cold. Sets with 4 or 5 boxes will inspire you to include a variety of healthy foods. This is perfect for those who prefer individual foods over mixed dishes.



Try filling the largest box with veggies, the medium ones with a lean protein source, fruit, and/or a whole grain, and in the smallest container (usually about an inch or two cube), something like dipping sauce, dressing, nuts, seeds, nut butter, cheese, or dried fruit. Bento boxes are also a great way to finally polish off those last few leftovers in the fridge.

4. Upgrade your sandwich.

If you're a PB&J fan, great! Look for a multigrain bread, and ensure your nut butter (peanut or otherwise) has no added sugar; try a delicious 100% fruit spread.



Is lunch meat your thing? Swap the processed stuff out for fresh, or give one of the plant-based sandwich fillings a try. Or stuff a whole grain wrap with peanut butter and banana, hummus and chopped raw veggies, or even a leftover curry or stir fry.

5. Do salads smartly.

Always pack dressing separately to avoid soggy salad, or keep your favorite at work if you have proper storage. Include more than just raw veggies -- you need something with a bit of staying power, so include some avocado, seasoned tofu, beans, or a hard boiled egg if you eat eggs. You can even top a green salad with dinner leftovers.



Trying to go more plant based but short on time? Try lettuce and chopped raw veggies topped with a crumbled microwaved veggie bean burger and a drizzle of olive oil and lemon juice.

May the Power Bowl Be With You

Pre-seasoned baked tofu is a convenient way to incorporate healthful soy protein. Just cut open the container and it's ready to eat! It's great for a filling, nutrient-packed lunch. This recipe requires minimal cooking so it's fast and easy.

- ½ package seasoned baked tofu, cubed
- ⅓ cup instant brown rice
- ⅓ cup canned black beans, rinsed and drained
- ¼ cup plain canned corn kernels
- ½ avocado
- ¼ cup of your favorite no-sugar added salad dressing (a lime-based dressing is good with this, or simply lime juice if you like to keep it simple)
- 1 cup halved grape tomatoes



Prepare brown rice according to package directions, Set aside.

In a large to-go container, assemble the tofu, black beans, tomatoes, corn, avocado, and brown rice.

Drizzle on dressing just before eating.

Note: This is a very versatile recipe! Substitute any whole grain for the brown rice, any bean for the black beans, and add any veggies you have on hand. For extra nutrients and crunch, top with pepitas.