



It's lunchbox season: Here are fresh ideas

Lunchbox season is here, and what you pack doesn't have to be pricey, complicated, or Pinterest-perfect to be good.

What does lunch really cost?

A typical packed lunch of a sandwich, fruit, and a vegetable comes in under \$5. So does a fun bento creation with basic ingredients like raw veggies, cheese, fruit, and whole grain crackers. Elaborate, multi-component lunches with specialty ingredients can push that number way up. Packing is usually cheaper than buying, but not always! It depends on what you choose.

For adults packing lunch for work, the savings can be quite substantial. A restaurant or takeout lunch runs \$12 to \$20 or more, depending on where you live and where you order from, while a homemade lunch typically costs \$3 to \$6. Pack your own four or five days a week, and those savings will add up fast.

The Formula

A lunch that will keep you or your kid full and focused generally includes a food with protein, a whole grain or fiber-rich starchy food, at least one thing from the produce aisle, and one thing that's just fun to eat. Hit those four and you've got a lunch that will delight whoever it's packed for.

Ideas for the Box

- Layer hummus, sliced seasoned baked tofu (ready to eat and available in the produce section of most large grocery stores), and shredded raw carrots in a whole grain wrap or tortilla.
- Pack leftover rice, black beans, corn, and shredded cheese into a container for a build-your-own burrito bowl.
- Spread nut butter or sunbutter between two rice cakes and pack alongside apple slices.
- Fill muffin tins with leftover pasta, marinara, and a sprinkle of cheese, then bake into portable pasta cups. They reheat well for those with microwave access, and taste just as good at room temperature for a kid's lunchbox.
- Toss canned chickpeas, chopped cucumber, tomato, and red onion with a spoonful of plain plant or dairy yogurt, a pinch of curry powder, and a squeeze of lemon for a quick curried chickpea salad.
- Pack pita and hummus with whatever fresh vegetables are cheapest that week, like carrots, spinach, cucumber, broccoli, bell peppers, etc.
- Layer yogurt, granola, and berries in a jar the night before for a grab-and-go parfait.
- Layer mashed avocado, sliced hard-boiled egg or seasoned baked tofu, and everything bagel seasoning on whole grain toast, then pack open-faced or as a sandwich.
- Whisk together sesame oil, soy sauce, a spoonful of peanut butter, and a splash of rice vinegar until smooth, then toss with leftover spaghetti and top with sliced cucumber and scallions for cold sesame noodles.

Budget Pasta Salad with Black Beans and Corn



This pasta salad is delicious cold and holds up well overnight in the fridge, making it easy to prep in a big batch for the week.

Ingredients:

- 8 oz pasta (rotini or elbow work well)
- 1 (15 oz) can black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 cup corn, fresh, frozen, or canned
- 1 bell pepper, diced
- 1/4 cup red onion, finely diced
- 3 tbsp olive oil
- 2 tbsp lime juice
- 1/2 tsp cumin
- Salt to taste

Instructions:

Cook the pasta according to package directions, then drain and rinse under cold water to cool it quickly.

In a large bowl, combine the pasta, black beans, corn, bell pepper, and red onion.

In a small bowl, whisk together the olive oil, lime juice, cumin, and salt, then pour over the pasta mixture and toss to coat.

Divide into containers and refrigerate. Keeps well for up to 4 days.