

LET'S DO LUNCH!

Contributed by Heidi Roth, RDN, CHHC

If you're anything like me, you made the most of summer. Visiting ice cream stands, staying up a little later than intended, and letting your meals and snacks get a little more... relaxed. *"Summertime and the livin' is easy..."*

But sadly, summer is winding down, and in many ways, it feels like the start of a new year. Think of it as a clean slate – a natural time to reset. It's the perfect time to swap out habits that aren't serving you for ones that will.

So, in addition to tightening up your bedtime and hitting the gym a little more, bringing (or at least planning) your lunch is an easy win, even if you work from home.

Benefits of Brown-bagging It

- **Better nutrition** - We tend to make better decisions for our future selves than we do our "hungry right now" selves. Packing your lunch helps you to make healthier choices. Think of it as a gift you give to your future self.
- **Portion control** - When you pack your own, you avoid the oversized portions common at restaurants. Once food is in front of us, it's hard not to overeat!
- **Budget-friendly** - Even \$10/day in takeout adds up quickly - to over \$2500 per year!

Build a Balanced Bag

Aim to include all four of these to build a satisfying and nourishing lunch.

1. **Protein** - grilled chicken, tuna, lentils, hard-boiled eggs, edamame, or Greek yogurt.
2. **Fiber-rich carbs** - whole grains (quinoa, brown rice, whole wheat wraps), beans, or fruit.
3. **Healthy fats** - avocado, olive oil, nuts, or seeds.
4. **Colorful veggies** - leafy greens, bell peppers, cucumbers, carrots.

Ideas to Try

Meal Prep:

- Schedule prep time like you would a meeting.
- Use good containers - invest in some leak-proof, glass or metal containers that are easy to clean.
- Make a batch of chicken, tuna, or chickpea salad to serve over greens or on whole grain bread.
- Mason jar salads are an easy way to prep salads. Put dressing on the bottom, layer sturdy veggies and protein, and top with lettuce. Keep the layers separate. "Never shall the dressing and the lettuce meet... until it's time to eat."
- If you have freezer space, assemble your own healthy "freezer lunches" in glass containers. These are lifesavers when you're short on time. Leftovers such as chicken stir-fry over brown rice, vegetable lasagna, etc. are perfect for this.
- Black bean quesadillas on whole grain tortillas are another great option. Refrigerate or freeze and thaw at room temp for a no-heat lunch.

Smarter Sandwiches:

- Choose whole grain bread. Ezekiel bread is a great, low-glycemic option (best toasted).
- For hoagie rolls or crusty bread, hollow them out to reduce excess empty carbs and to make room for veggies like sprouts, avocado, cucumber, and cilantro. Add a little avocado mayo. Try a Banh Mi spin with pickled carrot and daikon radish.
- Whole grain wraps are a great way to stuff in extra veggies.

The Adult "Lunchable":

- This is perfect if you like to graze and prefer a more snack-style lunch.
- Fill your container (a bento box is perfect for this) with carrots and celery sticks, whole grain crackers such as Mary's Gone Crackers, a slice of cheddar or Swiss, turkey wrapped around a pickle, grapes or apple slices, and a few nuts.





- The British version, called a Ploughman's lunch, often includes bread, cheese, pickles, and fruit. It's worth googling it for some inspiration!
- A Mediterranean box could include pita wedges, hummus, olives, feta cheese, cherry tomatoes, and cucumbers.

Make Lunch Happier

About 75% of office workers routinely eat lunch at their desk – hence all the “sad desk lunch” memes. You can make yours better:

- Block off lunch as a meeting-free zone.
- Bring a fun placemat to catch crumbs and create a little ambiance.
- Eat outside if you can.
- Invite a coworker. See if you can avoid talking about work.
- Add in a piece of dark chocolate or other healthy treat so it feels like something to look forward to.
- And lastly don't forget to sanitize your desk once in a while if your routine involves desktop dining.

RECIPE CORNER: GREAT GRAIN SALADS

Here's an easy formula for a whole grain salad that keeps for several days and is easy to pack! Choose your favorites from each category.

1-1½ cups cooked grain	1 cup protein	1-2 cups chopped veggies:	¼ cup extras (optional):	3-4 tablespoons of dressing:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Quinoa• Farro• Bulgur• Brown rice• Whole wheat couscous	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chickpeas• Black beans• Grilled chicken• Shrimp• Tofu	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cherry tomatoes• Cucumber• Bell peppers• Roasted sweet potatoes• Broccoli	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feta or goat cheese• Nuts/seeds• Fresh herbs• Craisins	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Olive oil + lemon juice• Balsamic vinaigrette• Tahini dressing

PREPARATION:

Combine grain, protein, and veggies in a large bowl. Add extras for flavor and texture. Drizzle with dressing and toss gently. Taste and adjust seasonings. Chill or pack into a container for a portable lunch.

FLAVOR COMBINATIONS:

Mediterranean: Quinoa + chickpeas + cherry tomatoes, cucumber, red onion, baby spinach + Feta, parsley + olive oil, lemon juice, oregano.

Southwest: Brown rice + grilled chicken or black beans + corn, bell peppers, avocado, romaine + shredded cheddar, cilantro + lime juice, olive oil, cumin, chili powder.

Asian-Inspired: Farro or brown rice + edamame or shrimp + shredded cabbage, carrots, scallions + sesame seeds, cilantro + soy sauce, rice vinegar, sesame oil, ginger.

What are you packing for lunch?



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