

# School Safety Alert

## School Cafeterias Serving Nutritionally Balanced Meals to Children



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*~Sandy Procter*

Manhattan -- Parents may remember the school lunches of years past, ones with unidentifiable pieces of meat and vegetables soggy from being overcooked: Lunches that were high in fat and low in nutritional value. As school starts up again, the responsibility of providing a healthy lunch will be shared by parents and school cafeterias.

A lot has changed in school lunch rooms during the past 10 years, but how healthy are today's school lunches?

Sandy Procter is a Kansas State University research and extension associate in human nutrition and coordinator of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program in the College of Human Ecology. As a registered dietitian, she addresses the nutritional needs of children and families and said today's school cafeterias strive to provide healthy and appetizing foods.

"It is true that in the past, school lunches were fairly high in fat. But an increasing amount of attention has been paid to fitting school meals into line with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and addressing the increasing concern of childhood obesity," Procter said. "School meals today are lower in fat and high in variety and nutrition. There's an emphasis on healthy choices for students."

Procter added school lunches are prepared by individuals with nutrition education and training.

"I am really sold on school lunch because of the huge strides made and the healthy variety that is offered," she said. "There are a lot of people who are working hard to make kid-friendly, nutritious meals."

Along with changes in the nutritional value of school lunches has come an increase in the different types of foods served, Procter said.

"I really think that we've come to the point where meals have variety, a wonderful choice for even the youngest students," she added. "They're not just having to eat what's put out in front of

them. They now have a choice between one, two or three entrees."

Children can be picky creatures, however, and there is always a time when a child would rather take a lunch to school. Procter said that because school-served lunches and packed lunches both have their benefits, the deciding factor is whether the child's caregiver has enough time to pack a nutritious meal.

"A home-packed lunch needs to have some focus and planning if it is going to be a healthy option," Procter added. "I think problems arise when the caregiver isn't planning ahead and doesn't have nutritious foods on hand."

For a healthy packed lunch, Procter suggest using whole-grain breads for sandwiches and low-fat yogurt and fruits and vegetables as a side dish. Packed lunches should also have three to four of the food groups represented.

"Children need a fourth to a third of their daily calorie intake coming from lunch," Procter said. "They also need the lunches to be nutrient-dense to fuel them through all of the day's activities. That minimizes opportunities for empty calorie foods."

"Individualize it so that the child has something that is exactly what they want. There are wonderful ways to keep foods healthy, to keep foods safe and appetizing. So it doesn't need to be less healthy."

While home-packed lunches may seem to offer a variety of different foods in the beginning, Procter said parents should remember meals thrown together in the morning can become boring and unhealthy.

"There is a real effort to make the school lunches attractive as well as nutritious," she added. "It is true that kids may only eat one or two things from a school-served lunch, but the same may be true if you send them with a home-packed lunch five days a week."

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