

# Everything You Need to Know about Packing a Lunch



**The Prepared Pantry**

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Packed lunches are not just for school kids; they're for too-busy days at the office, romantic get-a-ways, road trips, and more. Here we'll tell you everything you need to know about packing a lunch.

## Contents

Contents .....	2
Safety First: Keeping Lunches Safe.....	3
The Right Equipment.....	4
Successful Strategies for Packing Lunches.....	4
What to Put in Your Child's Lunch .....	6
Favorite Cookie Mixes .....	7
Favorite Cookie Recipes.....	8
Resources for Nutritional School Lunches.....	14

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## Safety First: Keeping Lunches Safe

Food safety is the first consideration in any lunch. Food poisoning is not just unpleasant, it can be dangerous. It can be avoided with attention to common sense principles.

**Principle #1: Recognize potentially hazardous foods.** Bacteria and most yeasts require a moist environment in which to grow. Generally speaking, if it is moist, it is potentially hazardous. (There are some exceptions such as a sugar-rich pie.)

**Principle #2: If it is potentially hazardous, keep it hot or keep it cold.** Bacteria will only grow at temperatures between 40 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit. Do not allow potentially hazardous foods to sit for extended periods in this temperature range.

Any food that needs to be refrigerated is potentially hazardous in a bagged lunch. That includes meats, dairy products, mayonnaise, and most dressings. These foods need to be stored below 40 degrees. The best way to do this is with an insulated lunch bag. Freeze the beverage and use that to keep the bag's contents below forty degrees until lunch. If that is not adequate, use some of the frozen "blue ice" coolers that can be purchased at department stores.

If Johnny doesn't eat his tuna sandwich at school, check it carefully before letting him eat it as an afternoon snack. In many cases, the beverage has long since melted and the tuna sandwich has been above forty degrees for hours.

With a thermos, we can pack hot foods—soups, beverages, and casseroles. It is important that hot foods be kept above 140 degrees. Use a good quality thermos and fill it with very hot—near boiling—food. If you suspect that the food has been below 140 degrees for several hours, don't eat it.

Here are some other hints for keeping that lunch safe:

- If you make lunches the night before, keep them in the refrigerator overnight. Not only will that protect the lunch overnight, but a chilled lunch will help keep the beverage frozen during the day.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables carefully before packing them in the lunch.
- It goes without saying; wash your hands before preparing the lunch.
- Wash and disinfect the lunch box, thermos, and your cold packs if they came in contact with potentially hazardous foods.

## **The Right Equipment**

Brown bags are a thing of the past. They work for a PBJ and chips but they don't work for potentially hazardous foods. If you want foods that require refrigeration or hot foods in your lunch, pass on the brown paper bag.

Pick up a good insulated lunch box. There are boxes that have two insulated compartments so that you can pack cold foods on one side and hot on the other. Get a quality thermos and several sealed, "blue ice" type cold packs. (You will need several so that you always have a cold pack on hand even when you forgot to put it in the freezer the night before.)

There is a dizzying array of lunch boxes available. Pick one that your child will find fun or attractive. Many of them have extra pockets where you can pack wet wipes or emergency money for your child.

## **Successful Strategies for Packing Lunches**

### **To Pack or to Buy?**

Do you pack a lunch for your children or do you have them buy school lunches? The nutritional value of school lunches varies from area to area. In many areas, lunches are too high in fat or calories. CNN recently reported that three out of four school lunch programs serve too much fat. They stated that school lunch programs offer "foods [that] tend to be at the bottom of the barrel in terms of healthy nutrition." Even those that are nutritionally balanced are not helpful if your children will not eat the foods presented. Consider packing a lunch if you are not confident in the nutritional standards of the program or your children's willingness to eat what is served.

The Associated Press just released a story about the rising cost of school lunches. We've never thought of bagging lunches as a money saving technique but apparently, in some school districts, it is.

### **Make it a Special Experience**

One year, our oldest daughter decided that packed lunches were the way to go. We both have fond memories of the experience . . . kind of a daddy-daughter thing. Here are some suggestions for making your lunch bagging memorable.

- Put a note in every bag. A note or special memento says, "I love you." It doesn't have to be long. "I'm proud of you," or "Thanks for helping with the dishes last night," will give your child something to look forward to in every lunch. Sign it, "Love, Mom or Dad." Use your imagination. Anything out-

of-the-ordinary, will make your child feel special. If you are bagging for a spouse, make it a romantic note.

- Make lunch a community event. If appropriate, put some extra cookies or candies in the bag for your child to share with her friends. Remember, lunches are social events for children also.
- Kid's love variety. Stock up on lunch items and put more but smaller servings in the lunch. If you put a large muffin--for example--in the lunch, part of it is likely to be thrown away. Instead, try a mini-muffin.
- Consider putting some moist towelettes in a zip-lock bag for cleanup.
- Fit your creativity to your child. Some children want the same lunch everyday, a favorite lunch that they enjoy. Others like something different and love to be surprised.
- Freeze your beverage before packing. Fill your container half to two-thirds full. After freezing, top it off with more of your cold beverage. Consider milk, water, or a fruit juice.
- Add a splash of color to your child's lunch—use colored plastic wrap instead of clear.
- For kids, pick fun names for food (even if you have to make them up). “Ants on a log” is more fun than celery sticks with peanut butter and raisins.

### **Making Lunches Easier and Better**

- If you work in an environment where lunches are the norm, make a deal with four friends: “I’ll bring the lunches on Tuesday and you bring them on Wednesday. It’s easier to make five lunches once a week than one lunch five times a week. Besides, you’ll probably enjoy better lunches with more variety.
- You can have a variety of cookies on hand if you freeze half of each batch. Select a cookie for your child's lunch and put it in the lunch while still frozen. The cold cookie, along with a frozen drink, will help keep the lunch cool. The cookie will be thawed by lunchtime.
- If you have lots of sandwiches to make, make them assembly style. Buttering eight slices of bread at once is quicker than doing it one at a time.

- For adults and older kids, consider on-site assembly. We recently packed a lunch up a lonely canyon. Once there, we put the salad together from greens stored in one plastic container, fruit in another, sliced chicken in another, and dressing in yet another. Sandwiches made with tomatoes, cucumber, or pickles are often better assembled on site.

## What to Put in Your Child's Lunch

- Be creative and think out of the box. There is nothing wrong with cold cereal in a lunch box, or cold pizza, or popcorn, or fried chicken, or macaroni and cheese. (Cold macaroni and cheese is not as bad as it sounds or you can send it hot in a thermos.)
- Check out the “lunchables” at the grocery store. They are small and a bit expensive but kids like them. Make duplicates of your child's favorites with crackers, small portions of meat and cheese, and a snack.
- Try lunch items with some kind of dip. Possibilities include pretzel or cracker sticks with peanut butter, bread sticks with cheese spread, tortilla chips with salsa, or carrots and celery with ranch dressing.
- Consider dried fruit. A little will go a long ways. Divided into small packages, dried fruit is not expensive.
- One of our readers suggested packing peanut butter and jelly sandwiches rolled up like a jelly roll. Just cut the crusts off, flatten the bread with a rolling pin and spread your filling. Place the cut side down in a Ziploc bag. She reported that her boys loved them.
- Sandwiches for lunch get all the press but we often prefer salads. Nearly all salads can be packed if you don't mind a little on-site assembly.
- Get some hard candies or mints. Put one in every bag.
- Kid's like crunch. Instead of a cheese or meat sandwich, try cheese or meat on crackers. Be sure to keep perishables cold.
- Smoothies are great addition to a lunch—both refreshing and nutritious. Because they pack fiber, they are more nutritious than juices and don't pack the sugar punch of commercial beverages. Make sure it's cold before placing it in the thermos.
- Include Jell-o or pudding with lunches. Use small plastic containers or save your yogurt containers, wash, and reuse them. Packing your own is much less expensive than buying individual packs at the store.

- Add variety by choosing different breads. Consider sandwich rolls, hamburger buns, Hawaiian bread, or pita bread.
- Flour tortillas spread with cream cheeses or peanut butter and rolled up jellyroll style make great sandwiches. We used tortillas and flavored cream cheese to make trail lunches when on hiking trips with scouts and they were always welcome. A favorite was cream cheese sprinkled with dried pineapple bits.
- Kids love to dip. Apple slices in a caramel dip, carrots in their favorite dressing, or bread sticks in peanut butter work well.
- Speaking of peanut butter, kids love peanut butter. Peanut butter and jelly is the all time favorite kids' sandwich but try others also—banana or apple slices, honey, or cream cheese with peanut butter. Peanut butter and honey with soft raisins is a hit.
- Make some trail mix or Kid's Party Munch.
- Cut sandwiches into shapes. Use cookie cutters or a sharp knife to cut into rectangles or triangles.

## **Favorite Cookie Mixes**

The following cookies are tough little cookies that travel well. Because they don't have nuts in them, kids like them.

Here are some cookie mixes to consider for your lunches:

- [Chocolate Sugarsnaps](#)
- [Old-Fashioned Spice Cookies](#)
- [Pennsylvania Dutch Sugar Cookies](#)
- [Snickerdoodles](#)
- [Chewy Chocolate Chip](#)

## Favorite Cookie Recipes

### ANZAC Biscuit Recipe

*The Original Road Warriors*

During World War II, the citizenry of Australia came up with a cookie—biscuits they called them—to supply the troops, something that would travel well, keep well, and provide lots of energy. Folks packaged them in tins by the thousands and sent them to the troops. They became a national institution for Australia and New Zealand—called ANZAC Biscuits.



(ANZAC is an acronym for Australia and New Zealand Army Corp.)

Every road warrior should have a supply of ANZAC Biscuits. They are really quite good and the little critters are almost indestructible. If you are going on a camping trip or packing a boy scout off to camp, you had better make some ANZAC Biscuits.

#### Ingredients

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup old-fashioned rolled oats
- 3/4 cup sweetened coconut, pressed in the measuring cup
- 1/2 cup butter
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 1/2 tablespoon baking soda
- 2 tablespoons water

#### Directions

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees.

1. Mix the flour, rolled oats, and coconut together in a large bowl.
2. In a saucepan at medium heat, melt the butter. Add the sugar and honey and continue cooking until the mixture has simmered for two minutes.
3. In a cup, mix the baking soda and water together. Remove the sugar mixture from the heat and stir the soda mixture into the sugar. When the soda hits the more acidic sugar and honey mixture it will bubble. Continue stirring until the bubbles subside.
4. Pour the sugar mixture into the dry ingredients and stir with a spatula until

combined.

5. Line baking sheets with aluminum foil or parchment paper. If you are using aluminum foil, grease the foil.

6. Form one to 1 1/4-inch balls of the dough and place them on the baking sheets leaving room for expansion. Bake for twelve minutes or until the cookies have spread and turned a golden color. Remove the sheets from the oven and slide the foil or paper from the sheets to wire racks. Let the cookies cool and then peel them from the foil or paper.

### **The Best Oatmeal Cookies**

Sometimes keeping things basic is the best. Ben, our eighteen year-old son, doesn't like raisins or nuts in his cookies—but he sure likes these cookies. And they are very good. And they're easy.



Of course, you don't have to keep them basic. You can add nuts, raisins, or chocolate chips. Because they spread into relatively thin cookies, we decided to fill them and make sandwich cookies out of them.

We used chocolate marshmallow cream. They were a little gooey but the kids thought they were great.

### **Recipe for the Best Oatmeal Cookies**

#### **Ingredients**

1 1/3 cups all-purpose flour  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1/2 teaspoon baking soda  
1/2 teaspoon baking powder  
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon

1 cup butter  
3/4 cup granulated sugar  
3/4 cup brown sugar  
2 large eggs

3 cups old-fashioned rolled oats

#### **Directions**

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

1. Mix the flour, salt, baking soda, baking powder, and cinnamon together in a small bowl. Set aside.
2. Cream the butter and the sugars together. Add the eggs. Beat until the mixture is light and fluffy.
3. Add the flour mixture to the creamed mixture and beat until combined. Add the rolled oats and continue beating. (If you are adding chips or nuts, add them now.)
4. Place rounded teaspoons of dough on a lightly greased baking sheet. The resulting mounds of dough should be no larger than walnuts.
5. Bake for 9 to 10 minutes or until done. Let sit on the cookie sheet for two minutes and then remove them to a wire rack to completely cool.

### **Peanutty Peanut Butter Cookies**

These peanut butter cookies have two characteristics that make them outstanding. They have enough butter to be smooth without the “sandy” texture of many peanut butter cookies and they are loaded with snack-type peanuts. We designed these as kids’ cookies but they may be even better as adult cookies.



#### **Ingredients**

- 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
  
- 3/4 cup butter
- 1/3 cup granulated sugar
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 3/4 cup peanut butter
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 large eggs
- 1 1/2 cups salted snack-type peanuts

#### **Directions**

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees

7. Mix the flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt in a small bowl.
8. Cream the butter and sugars together. Add the peanut butter, honey, eggs and vanilla and beat until light and fluffy. Add the dry ingredients and beat in. Add the peanuts.
9. Spoon the batter onto greased cookie sheets about two inches apart. With the back of the spoon, flatten the dough to 1/2 inch to 3/4 inch in thickness. Bake them for nine to ten minutes or until done. (Do not over bake.) Let them sit on the baking sheet for one minute and then move them to wire racks to cool.

***Baker's Notes:*** *This is a very good cookie. The honey was added as a hygroscopic agent to help keep the cookies moist.*

*We used Adams® brand 100% peanut butter with chunks in our testing. This made a very good cookie. Other peanut butters should work.*

### **Peanut Butter Sandwich Cookies with Ganache Filling**

This is really a recipe for peanut butter yoyo cookies—thin peanut butter wafers sandwiched with a creamy chocolate filling. This recipe is bound to be a hit at your house. It's one of our favorite recipes.



For the very best cookies, use a quality chocolate though good quality chocolate chips will make a fine cookie.

#### **Ingredients**

- 1/2 cup butter
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup brown sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 large egg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 3/4 cup peanut butter
  
- 1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda

#### **Directions**

1. Cream the butter and sugars together with the paddle attachment of your mixer. Add the salt, egg, and vanilla and beat until smooth. Add the peanut butter

and mix.

2. Add the flour and baking soda and beat until combined.
3. Refrigerate the dough for 20 minutes to firm up slightly.
4. Divide the dough into two portions. Using wax paper, roll each portion into logs 1 1/2-inches in diameter. Refrigerate for two hours or until firm
5. Preheat the oven to 325 degrees. Cut cookies into slices just thicker than 1/4 inch. Place them on a greased baking sheet and bake 12 to 14 minutes or until the cookies just start to brown on the edges. Cool on a wire rack.

For the filling:

Mix 1/2 cup whipping cream, one tablespoons butter, and 2 tablespoons of light corn syrup in a heavy saucepan. Heat until it simmers. Remove the pan from the heat and immediately add six ounces of semisweet baking chocolate chopped into pieces. Stir until the chocolate is melted into a smooth sauce. The filling will thicken as it cools.

This can also be made with one cup of semisweet chocolate chips though the lack of cocoa butter in the chocolate chips will affect the flavor. If you use chocolate chips, increase the butter to two tablespoons.

### **Neapolitan Cookies and More**

You can tell that we had fun with these cookies. We made Neapolitan Cookies—but with one part chocolate, one part almond, and one part cherry—but think of it as a method, not a recipe. By changing flavors and colors, you can make any combination you desire. Use your imagination. Make circles, stripes, swirls, or squares.



These make great kids cookies, great holiday cookies, and great party cookies.

You can make a variety of shapes, colors, and flavors with this basic recipe--from shamrocks to Christmas cookies. In the accompanying pictures, we made tri-colored cookies with chocolate, almond, and cherry doughs.

### **Ingredients**

- 3 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder

1/2 teaspoon salt  
1 cup butter  
1 1/3 cups sugar  
2 large eggs

2 ounces unsweetened chocolate (optional)  
flavors and extracts (your choice)  
food colors (your choice)

#### Directions

1. In a medium bowl, whisk the flour, baking powder, and salt together.
2. Cream the butter and sugar together. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating until smooth. Continue beating until the mixture is light and fluffy. Add the dry ingredients in two parts, mixing after each. Mix just until combined.
3. Divide the dough into two, three, or four parts depending on how many different doughs you choose to make.

For the chocolate dough:

For one half of the dough, melt two ounces of chocolate. For one fourth of the dough, melt one ounce of chocolate. While still warm, work the chocolate into the dough until uniform.

For flavored and colored doughs:

Add four or five drops of food coloring in each one fourth or one third part. Add 1 teaspoon vanilla, 1 teaspoon almond, 1/4 teaspoon peppermint, 1 teaspoon cherry, 1 teaspoon strawberry, or other extracts to the dough and mix in.

4. Form the dough into cylinders, squares, or layers—a separate color or flavor for each. Refrigerate until firm.
5. Cut the dough into 1/4-inch thick slices. To form the cloverleaf shape shown, cut each colored cylinder separately but gently press the different colored discs together on the cookie sheet. Bake on ungreased cookies sheets at 350 degrees for ten to twelve minutes or until the cookies are nearly firmed and very lightly browned. Do not over bake. Cool on wire racks.

*Baker's note: Nuts or fruit can be added to these cookies. Maraschino cherry pieces could be added to the pink dough and almond bits to the almond dough.*

*Baker's note: It's easy to shape refrigerator cookies with waxed paper. To make true checkerboard cookies, you need four layers—not three. Make a rectangle with four layers. Then cut the rectangle longitudinally into four new layers. Layer them back together so that the colors alternate and cut slices across the rectangle. (It's easier to do than to describe.)*

## **Resources for Nutritional School Lunches**

[The School Nutrition Association](#) is loaded with information for making nutritional lunches for kids.

[Healthy School Lunches](#) is a web site sponsored by a committee of physicians dedicated to better lunches for kids.