

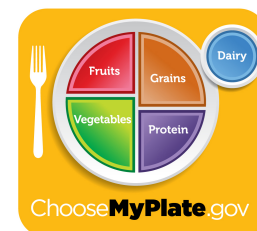
## Healthy, hassle-free lunches

With a new year ahead, some of us are looking to eat healthier, and perhaps save a little money while we're at it. With a goal like this, it can be hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel, let alone identify a starting point. Set yourself up for success by tackling just one meal a day, starting with lunch. When it comes to our midday meals, Americans spend approximately [\\$1,000 annually eating out](#)<sup>1</sup>, which is obviously the less healthy, more expensive option than bringing your lunch to work. So, the first rule of thumb is to eat out less often.

Just because you're not eating out doesn't mean you have to be bored with your food, nor does it have to take much time to pack a healthy lunch. What it does require is a little meal planning and a bit of knowledge about what foods to keep on hand. When you arm yourself with [a well-stocked pantry](#)<sup>2</sup> and refrigerator full of fresh produce, you've already won half the battle.

### What makes a lunch healthy?

A healthy lunch is a balanced one. A combination of protein from lean meat and/or beans, fiber from whole grains, and additional nutrients from nuts, veggies, and fruit will keep you fueled for longer, more focused and productive at work, and leave you feeling better all around. Make sure the amount you pack for lunch meets the [USDA's MyPlate](#)<sup>3</sup> recommendations.



### Quick and easy ideas

As long as you have certain ingredients on hand, you can make a variety of tasty lunch items. It's a good idea to cook and prep items on the weekend so you've got everything you need for a quick assembly during the week. Remember, in order to eat healthy, you must be prepared. Here are a few ideas to jump-start your new lunch venture.

#### Everything burritos

Start with whole grain tortillas and a low-fat cheese as your base. Then, add a combination of lean meat (turkey, chicken, or beef), veggies, beans (e.g., black, kidney, lentils, white, garbanzo) and you're done. Eat it cold or throw it in the microwave before eating. Not enough flavor? Keep hot sauce at your worksite to add pizzazz and [give your health a boost](#)<sup>4</sup> in the meantime.

#### Super food salads

This delicious and nutritious lunch option is so versatile you can make it with just about anything, as long as you have some type of veggie for a base (and it doesn't have to be lettuce either). For those who simply don't like lettuce, try out these [no-lettuce salad options](#)<sup>5</sup>. Prefer lettuce? Opt for varieties with darker leaves because those are the most nutrient-dense. Top your salad with a

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lean protein and/or beans, veggies or fruit of your choice, low-fat cheese or cottage cheese, and nuts or seeds for a little extra crunch. Sunflower seeds are a good addition, as are low- to no-salt almonds. Remember to pack dressing on the side to avoid a soggy salad, and opt for vinegar and oil-based options over creamy dressing varieties.

## Hearty soups

Looking for a delicious and versatile lunch option? Healthy and easy, soup can be eaten on its own or paired with a salad or sandwich. One thing is certain; you'll have a hard time boring the taste buds with this lunch option. Before getting the slow cooker out, make sure you have the essentials on hand. Here's what you'll need in stock:

- Meat, if desired (chicken, turkey, pork/bacon, or lean beef)
- Whole peeled or diced tomatoes, canned
- Chicken, vegetable, and/or beef broth
- Tomato paste
- Fresh and/or frozen veggies (peas, carrots, corn, etc.)
- Pasta (spaghetti, angel hair, Alfredo, etc.)
- Onion (white, yellow, scallions)
- Garlic
- Beans, canned (lentils, white, kidney, black)
- Spices (salt, pepper, thyme, chili powder, cumin, oregano)
- Olive oil
- Lemon juice

Check out these [soup recipes](#)<sup>6</sup> for some great ideas.

## No-refrigerator options

If you don't have the option to keep your lunches cold, there are plenty of items that require no refrigeration. Below are some examples of foods that don't have to be refrigerated:

- Peanut butter and other nut butters, such as almond, cashew, sunflower, and soybean
- All-fruit jams
- Condiments such as ketchup, mustard, relishes and pickled foods, honey
- Whole grains, such as bread, crackers, cereals
- Dried meats, such as pepperoni, salami, and jerky
- Fresh, uncooked fruits and vegetables, such as apples, bananas, oranges, berries, carrots, celery, peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes, broccoli, cauliflower
- Canned foods (when unopened), from fruits and vegetables to tuna and chicken
- Dried fruits
- Nuts

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Be sure to pack foods that don't invite bacteria growth for food safety purposes.

The "[Temperature Danger Zone](#)"<sup>7</sup> is between 40° and 140°F, and this is when bacteria grows the fastest. Foods high in protein and moisture content should not be left out in the Danger Zone for more than two hours. Avoid packing foods that will be sitting out for a while – the warmer the food is, the quicker the bacteria grows.

Bottom line, there's always an excuse to make unhealthy choices. Being prepared when temptation strikes is the key to staying on track with your health goals. It's a good idea to pack snacks for the in-between moments when you'd otherwise be heading to the vending machine. There are plenty of [smart snacking options](#)<sup>8</sup>, but as it goes with a healthy lunch, you've just got to be prepared.

## Sources

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