

Back To School

*Community Dietitian – Melodie Hercules
Nutrition Unit*

Summer is over and school is about to begin. The children had an active and fun few weeks but now it is time to get back into the groove of going to school, bedtimes and homework. As parents you have a list of things to check off before they go back to school. New backpack? Check. Shoes? Check. Notebooks and pencils? Check. What about healthy snacks? A water bottle so they stay hydrated? Are those checked?

Within the first few weeks of the new school term many parents and students report that their children always develop the flu after starting back the new school term. Often times this is due to a weakened immune system and being at school with hundreds of children and a lot of dust is the perfect environment for bacteria and viruses to spread from one child to another.

It is important to create healthy habits in our children to ensure that they make good decisions when the adults are not around and this will also help to curb the rate of NCD's (Non Communicable Diseases) such as diabetes, hypertension, etc. Research has shown that there is an increase in the rate of overweight and obese children, and obesity is one of the major risk factors for the development of NCD's.

What children eat affects every aspect of their day, including their mood, energy levels, and school performance. A study conducted by researchers at Tufts University showed that 3rd and 4th grade children consuming more snack foods and sugar-sweetened beverages had lower scores on standardized academic tests. In another new study, researchers at the University of Illinois found that children with greater ongoing hydration performed better during tasks requiring cognitive flexibility.

Here are some nutrition tips to ensure a bright start to a new school year:

1. **Start the day with breakfast:** Breakfast may just be the most important meal of the day, especially for students. Research shows that children who eat breakfast regularly are more likely to have better concentration, problem-solving skills, creativity, and school attendance than those who do not. Some easy and nutrition breakfast ideas:
 - Fruits, then cornflakes and milk
 - A bowl of oats topped with cinnamon/dark chocolate or fruit of choice
 - Oat pancakes (you can add dark chocolate chips, bananas or whatever else the child enjoys)
 - Breakfast smoothie

Prep ingredients for breakfast the night before. This makes the morning go quicker and smoother, and can leave one less thing to worry about when mornings get busy.

2. **Get the children involved:** Including children in the meal-making process can help combat picky eating. Allowing children to have a say in what goes into their meals and snacks, as well as learning the skills to make it, can empower them to make healthier choices, and set the foundation for improving food skills. Involving your children in the grocery shopping process as well can allow you the opportunity to pick out healthy options together, and explore new foods to try. Start off with fiber-rich options such as whole-grain breads or wraps, and fresh fruits and vegetables. Include lean proteins like skinless chicken breast, tuna fish, or bean-based pastas to build well-rounded lunches. Let them see that eating healthy can be fun and delicious.
3. **Embrace the food groups:** Create a balanced meal by including options from the different food groups such as fruits and veggies, whole grains, meat/meat alternatives, and dairy/dairy alternatives. Bento boxes with separate compartments are a fun and easy way to build a balanced meal that includes foods from each group.
4. **Stock up on nutritious snacks:** Having healthy snacks ready to go can make powering through busy schedules more manageable. Packing nutritious snack options can help in making healthier choices easier, and provide children with longer-lasting energy they need for afterschool activities, sports, or events. Options like popcorn, granola and fruit can be used and if you are buying packaged snacks remember to read the food labels and choose ones low in salt and sugar.
5. **Make sure they have water bottles:** Yes! Water bottles, more than 1. This does not have to be an expensive venture as you can practice the three R's: Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. Use bottles you already have at home. Staying hydrated is critical for the body to be able to carry out the various functions it has and also helps the children to be more focused, alert and less fatigued.

Have a healthy and productive school year!