

Nutritious ideas to cure bag boredom

Lunch in a brown bag can certainly lose its appeal when it consists of a dry sandwich, bruised apple and crumbly cookies day after day.

The packed lunch is subject to some limitations, but it can be creative, interesting and nutritious as well as safe. It is estimated that 80 million Americans carry a lunch daily, so if you're having problems being creative, you're not alone.

Why the surge in brown bag lunches? The reasons are many: time, money, convenience and an increased interest in health and good nutrition. Lunches are packed for dieters, fitness fans who exercise at noon, picky kids and adults as well as hard-working hard hats. Brown bag lunches can be hearty or low-cal, special diet or special taste, simple or fancy.

Even when refrigeration is not available, many sandwich fillings will travel and keep well throughout the morning. Nonperishable sandwich choices include dried meats, fully cooked meats such as bologna or salami, cheeses and cheese spreads.

Vary the garnishes on these sandwiches — try pickle, cucumber or green pepper slices. Live up the old favorite standby — peanut butter — by replacing the jelly with mashed or sliced banana, apple slices, apple butter, dried fruit or grated carrots. Try some mashed baked beans for a different sandwich spread.

Sandwiches can be made from many perishable foods, such as sliced chicken, turkey and leftover meats and frozen ahead. Remove from the freezer in the morning and they will thaw in time for lunch.

Some items that don't freeze well are mayonnaise, egg salad, jelly, tomatoes and lettuce. Substitute salad



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dressing for mayonnaise if you are freezing the sandwich. If you start with frozen bread, it will keep the filling cool and be thawed by noon and safe to eat. If you are packing sandwiches in plastic bags, be sure to gently press out all the air before closing. This helps sandwiches stay fresh and moist.

The key to a good sandwich that isn't soggy is to spread bread slices with softened margarine to "seal" them. Cream cheese, processed cheese spreads and peanut butter are other spreads that seal bread. Spread evenly and all the way to the edges.

Another way to introduce variety into the brown bag lunch is to vary the types of bread used. Two slices of white bread becomes boring — so try one slice of white and one of whole grain or oatmeal, pumpernickel, rye or pumpernickel. Instead of a bread sandwich, include a bagel or English muffin, hamburger bun or use a hot dog bun to make a reuben sandwich.

Make an "unsandwich" by packing a container of sandwich filling and add some crackers. Cheese and crackers, graham crackers spread with peanut butter, or nut or fruit breads spread with cream cheese add variety to lunches.

Encourage children to eat their sandwich at noon instead of waiting until the bus ride home. This will ensure a safer lunch. If they want to save something for the afternoon,

suggest it be the fruit or vegetable.

Fruits and vegetables are easy to include in a brown bag lunch. Raw vegetables such as carrots, green pepper, broccoli, cauliflower, celery and radishes can add texture and color. A little container of sour cream with onion soup or a creamy salad dressing or yogurt can be included as a dip for the veggies. A tossed salad can be packed into a plastic container.

Try slicing an apple, spread each slice with peanut butter or cheese and rebuild the apple in original shape, wrap in foil. If you are putting an orange into a lunch bag, peel

it for a child. Most children do not like to "waste" time on that task.

Freeze fruit juice, elder, orange juice, lemonade, etc., into plastic containers to drink, especially if milk is not available. Keeping these in the box or bag will also help keep the other foods cool. Don't send canned soda with children to school.

Many of the individually wrapped "treats" become very expensive to include if you are making lots of lunches. Homemade cookies are generally more nutritious than the kind you purchase. Instead of potato chips, make a toasted mix with cereal, a few pretzels, peanuts and dried fruits. Freeze yogurt, it will be thawed by noon, but still cool.

If you are dieting and carrying a brown bag lunch, lunch needn't be dull.

Bread has approximately 60 calories per slice, and provides important nutrients including protein, com-

plex carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals and dietary fiber. Bread itself is not fattening — it's the company it keeps.

Save calories by using diet margarine. Substitute other ingredients for the higher calorie mayonnaise-type dressings. Low calorie foods make great sandwich filling for dieters. Ricotta cheese is a rich-tasting cream cheese replacement, low or reduced-fat cheddar, mozzarella or processed cheeses contain few calories but still have good flavor. Hard-cooked eggs have only 80 calories each. Plain yogurt, a good substitute for mayonnaise or salad dressing.

Water packed tuna, cooked chicken or turkey give a mountain of nutrition for a molehill of calories.

Sliced cucumbers, zucchini,

chopped raw or cooked broccoli and mushrooms, sliced or chopped tomatoes or any vegetable raw or cooked can add flavor to a sandwich or a salad.

Make a "greens" sandwich with pita bread by filling the cavity with sprouts, spinach, lettuce or shredded cabbage. This can make a big and satisfying sandwich for very few calories.

Now that the holidays are over and everyone is getting back to a normal routine and lunch is again served in a bag, make them creative and interesting and avoid brown bag boredom.

Lois Thieleke is a home economist with the Oakland County Cooperative Extension Service. Watch for her next column, "Meals in Minutes."

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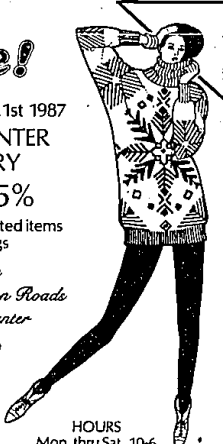


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A fresh approach to wintertime snacking

Looking for variations and innovation in old favorites for the cold weather months ahead, then try the Super Snack Mix, one of those can't-stop-munching-it treats. It's based on the popular breakfast cereal snack mix, only now with the delicious addition of chocolate-coated peanut candies. This crunchy sweet and savory mix is a colorful complement to hot chocolate.

SUPER SNACK MIX

- 1/4 cup margarine or butter
- 1/2 cup creamy peanut butter
- 2 tbsp. firmly packed light brown sugar
- 3 cups bite-size crispy wheat cereal squares
- 2 cups bite-size crispy rice or corn cereal squares
- 2 cups thin pretzel sticks, broken in half
- 2 cups chocolate-coated peanut candies

Melt together margarine, peanut butter and brown sugar in saucepan over medium heat. Combine cereals, place in saucepan, mixing until thoroughly coated; spread evenly into 15x10x1/2-inch jelly roll pan. Bake in a preheated oven at 300°F for 45 minutes, stirring every 15 minutes. Cool thoroughly. Add pretzels and candies; mix well. Serve as snack mix. Makes about 8 cups.

HOT CHOCO RUM

- 2 cups milk, heated
 - 1/2 cup candy-coated chocolate pieces
 - 1/2 to 1 teaspoon rum extract
- Place milk, candies and rum extract in blender. Cover; blend at lowest speed about 15 seconds. Continue blending at medium-high speed about 20 seconds. Pour into mugs. Makes four 1/2 cup servings.

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