

BETTER THAN A BROWN BAG!

Lunch bags come in an assortment of shapes and sizes, and it's something kids like to have a hand in selecting. Here are a few fun, practical options, some of which help reduce waste in the lunchroom, too.

Balanced Lunch Kits

Balanced Day Lunch bags have two separate compartments that make it easy to separate hot foods from cold, and the cookies from the cold cuts. www.balanceddaylunchkit.com.

A Blank Canvas

Not only is it eco-friendly, this organic-cotton lunch bag can also be a fun art project. The blank canvas lets kids decorate and personalize the bag, and it easily flattens and fits in a book satchel to carry home. www.ecobags.com.

Froggy-riffic

This lunch bag by Arctic Zone is carried over the shoulder like a purse. Made from neoprene and equipped with a reusable ice pack, it keeps things cold for hours. It also comes with a removable microbial snap-liner that makes it easy to clean. Available at Target.

CitizenPip Lunch Kits

Created by a mom who was tired of throwing out plastic baggies, these lunch kits and products are free of BPA, lead and phthalates. You can order what you need individually or in kits, including silverware, food containers, water bottle and insulated lunch bags. Schools can earn a percentage of the profits when purchased online with a school code. www.citizenpip.com.

Terracycle Drink Pouch Lunch Box

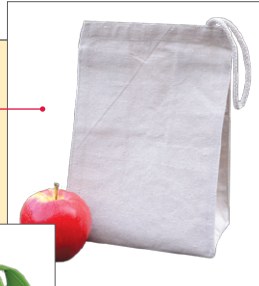
Made from up-cycled juice pouches, the Terracycle lunch bag is an unusual twist on the traditional insulated lunch box. TerraCycle diverts tons of waste juice pouches annually and donates 2 cents to a charity or nonprofit for each pouch collected. www.terracycle.net.

Laptop Lunches

The Bento System 2.0 by Laptop Lunches includes five inner containers that rest in a tray, a set of stainless-steel utensils and a water bottle, all of which zip into an insulated mini-laptop case. Available at local retailers; try Earth Fare and Hold Your Own in Raleigh, Green Pea Nursery in Apex, Hold Your Own and Durham Food Co-op in Durham, and Twig in Chapel Hill. www.laptoplunches.com.

Lunchbox Love Notes

Send a little love along with your child's lunch with these credit-card sized notes that feature positive, encouraging words on the front and fun trivia facts on the back. www.sayplease.com.



MAKE A HEALTHIER CHOICE

Some of those lunch-box items you think are healthy may not be as good for you or your child as you think. Here are a few that might seem innocent for a lunchbox staple, but pack a lot of the three bad items: sodium, fat and sugar. We found some alternatives that are just as tasty.

LUNCH ITEM: OSCAR MAYER LUNCHABLES CRACKER STACKERS LOW-FAT HAM AND SWISS CHEESE

Fast facts: This seemingly well-rounded meal contains 970 milligrams sodium. That's about 320 milligrams more than an average stick of salted butter.

Alternative: Try a slice of Boar's Head Swiss cheese, a slice of Hillshire Farm ham and a serving of Triscuit's baked whole grain crackers for a lower sodium profile of 318 milligrams.

LUNCH ITEM: CAPRI SUN BERRY BREEZE

Fast facts: Just because it's 100 percent juice doesn't mean it's healthy. A single pouch contains 19 grams of sugar and 100 calories.

Alternative: Try Organic Mixed Berry Sensible Sippers juice boxes with 9 grams of sugar and 35 calories.

LUNCH ITEM: PRINGLES ORIGINAL SNACK STACKERS

Fast facts: One container holds 10 grams of fat. That's one more gram of fat than a McDonald's hamburger.

Alternative: Try Pirate's Booty Potato Flyers for half the fat content.

LUNCH ITEM: OTIS SPUNKMEYER BLUEBERRY MINI-MUFFINS

Fast facts: One serving has 10 grams of fat and 40 milligrams of cholesterol. That's three more grams of fat, and twice the cholesterol, of a serving of Breyer's Vanilla Ice Cream.

Alternative: Try a Quaker Oats Chewy Chocolate Chip Granola Bar that has 3 grams of fat and no cholesterol.

LUNCH ITEM: OCEAN SPRAY CRAISINS

Fast facts: Dried fruit is as healthy as fresh fruit, right? Not exactly. One serving contains about 29 grams of sugar. That's five more grams than what you'll get from a standard Hershey Bar.

Alternative: Try tossing in a medium apple for just 14 grams of sugar.