

Sneak In Some Veggies

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Stop the Veggie Shortage

We know what it's like. If left to her own devices, your tot would eat mac-and-cheese three meals a day and acts like it's torture to finish her salad. "Many children are not prompted to eat truly balanced meals," says Kerry Neville, RD, a Kirkland, Washington-based dietitian and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. The primo problem? Getting in the green stuff, says Neville. In one recent study from the University of Rochester Medical Center, nearly 60 percent of adolescents ate only about one fruit or veggie a day -- behavior that likely dates back to not-so-great eating habits established when they were young.

But you needn't banish pizza forever. Instead, sneak fruits and veggies into your kids' beloved though less-than-healthy meals. Here, no-hassle lunch and dinner makeover ideas for eight go-to favorites.



Pizza

The Makeover: Whether you're ordering in, heating it up, or making it from scratch, top your pie with flavor-packed nutrient-boosters like chopped tomatoes, red peppers, broccoli, and basil leaves. Aim for about 1/4 to 1/2 cup of vegetables or fruit (pineapple makes a great topper) per slice. Bonus: This is a great task for a mini sous chef hankering to help in the kitchen.

Expert Tip: If you opt to make your pie from scratch, use a whole wheat crust and low-fat cheese. "Or try mixing parmesan or white cheddar with your basic mozzarella," says Sarah Krieger, RD, a St. Petersburg, Florida-based dietitian and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. The stronger flavor of those cheeses means you can get away with using less.



Chicken Fingers

The Makeover: Balance out this typically fried dish by serving healthy sides. Instead of greasy French fries, make your own baked sweet potato fries -- they're packed with vitamin A and also provide some fiber if you leave the skin on. "Keep some sliced veggies on the table too," advises Krieger. "If they're out there, your kids will inevitably munch on them."

Expert Tip: For healthier chicken nuggets, skip the premade stuff. Instead, dip chicken breasts or tenders in egg wash (a mix of egg whites and skim milk), then in seasoned bread crumbs or crushed corn flakes. Bake in the oven at 425 degrees F. for 20 minutes.

[Baked Sweet Potato Fries](#)



Mac-and-Cheese

The Makeover: Whipping it up from the box? Then just add some frozen mixed vegetables, like cauliflower, broccoli, and carrots, which help to boost this high-fat, low-fiber entree. "Don't assume your kids won't like it -- everything tastes better when it's doused in cheese!" says Krieger. In fact, a recent Penn State University study found that using "stealth vegetables" -- hiding them in sauces so that kids don't automatically recognize them -- helped boost preschoolers' veggie intake and slash their calorie consumption significantly compared to those who ate pasta without extra vegetables tossed in.

Expert Tip: If you're doing the from-scratch thing, make your dish even healthier with whole wheat pasta and low-fat cheese. Try flavor-packed cheddar instead of processed American.



Hot Dogs

The Makeover: For a natural way to serve up veggies with this summertime staple, prepare your dogs Chicago-style -- topped with pickles, tomato slices, onions, and peppers -- on whole wheat buns. Or you can try serving a broccoslaw salad, a healthier take on traditional coleslaw that uses shredded broccoli in addition to cabbage and carrots. Look for a prepackaged bag at your local market, and mix in a low-fat dressing instead of mayo.

Expert Tip: "Be a food label maven," says Neville. "There are so many options out there, so pick hot dogs with the least total fat and saturated fat per serving."



Spaghetti & Meatballs

The Makeover: "Marinara sauce is a good start," says Neville, "But you can doctor it up by mixing in a can of antioxidant-packed diced tomatoes before heating in a saucepan." Then toss in shredded carrots, chopped mushrooms, and onions to beef up the veggie quotient even more.

Expert Tip: "Because of restaurant super-sizing, we're used to eating meatballs as big as a fist," says Neville. Instead, give mini-meatballs a go. The portions are more age-appropriate and easier for little kids to handle, and chances are you and your hubby will eat a bit less (and cut back on calories) too.



Chicken Noodle Soup

The Makeover: Canned chicken soup may be good for a winter warm-up, but it could use some help in the nutrient department. Supplement its paltry vegetable and protein portions by cracking open a jar of white beans or chickpeas (for extra protein) and add in some defrosted frozen vegetables -- we like pea and carrot combos. Stir in about 1/4 cup of each for a heartier helping.

Expert Tip: Mix things up from time to time by serving a smaller soup portion along with half of a low-fat sandwich, like turkey on whole wheat bread.



Grilled Cheese

The Makeover: Add a slice of lean ham or turkey and a couple of tomatoes before grilling for a quick way to pack this simple sandwich with more protein and veggies.

Expert Tip: Skip the butter (it's high in saturated fat). Instead, brush the pan with unsaturated canola oil, which is more heart-healthy.



Peanut Butter & Jelly

The Makeover: PB&J is a natural fit for add-ons like bananas and apple slices, says Neville. You can even try skipping the jelly entirely (most commercial jellies are sugar-packed empty calories) and loading the sandwich up with fruit instead.

Expert Tip: Regular peanut butter has extra sugar and may contain artery-clogging trans fats and saturated fats. So buy natural peanut butter and serve it on whole wheat bread. Kid won't part with his go-to grape jelly? Look for labels that say "low sugar" or "fruit only."

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