

## Pack a Power Lunch for Peak Performance at Work

--Amy J. Reuter MS,RD

Energy, nutrient, and mood boosts bestowed on breakfast consumers are unparalleled. Starting the day with a healthy breakfast significantly contributes to morning productivity and well-being. Yet, three to four hours later these boosts begin to wane. Unless this morning momentum is maintained, conditions are set for an afternoon slump. It is time to reach for a power lunch. Packed with energy and nutrients, a power lunch is vital to afternoon performance. Having a prepacked lunch ready to consume optimizes this midday refueling.

Lunch is a pivotal meal. It refuels the body after a busy morning routine and before demanding afternoon activities. Food consumed at lunch can also provide essential daily nutrients. A power packed lunch starts with foods containing carbohydrates, protein and a small amount of added fat. Carbohydrate rich foods including whole grains, fruits and vegetables provide energy. The protein in foods such as lean meats, beans, low fat milk and yogurt regulates digestion and absorption, transports oxygen throughout the body, repairs muscle tissue and supplies energy. A small amount of added fat from spreads, sauces, dressings and other seasonings promotes satiety. Consuming a lunch comprised of foods containing a balance of carbohydrates, protein and fat will keep the body working efficiently throughout the afternoon. The challenge is to translate these nutrients along with vitamins, minerals and fiber into visually appealing, flavorful food that fuel the afternoon activities.

**Break Away from Bland with Variety.** No “perfect” food containing all of the nutrient needs of the body exists. Instead, our bodies daily need a combination of foods representing each of the Five Food Groups (Grains, Vegetables, Fruit, Milk, and Meat & Beans). At lunch strive to include foods from at least 4 of the 5 food groups.(include chart with examples from each food group). In addition choose a variety of foods within each food group. For instance, have a banana one day, a pear the next and a handful of grapes on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day. Consuming a variety of foods daily ensures that your body is receiving the nutrients it needs for top performance.

In addition to choosing a variety of foods for nutrient content, consuming an assortment of foods will also prevent brown bag boredom. Eating the same turkey sandwich on whole-wheat bread with a banana a cup of low-fat yogurt and carrot sticks day after day, while nutrient dense, can quickly numb the taste buds. Instead, choose foods with a potpourri of flavors, spices, textures, and colors. Adding a visual and sensory spark to the lunchbox contents can perk up your mood as well as your energy. Think flavor.

Depart from traditional fare. Pack a lunch filled with pizzazz. Enjoy a thermos of lentil soup, a bean burrito, a yogurt-based fruit smoothie with a soft whole-grain pretzel, fixing for chicken fajitas, sushi or hummus and tabouleh on lavash. The produce aisle or local farmers markets also provides ample fruit and vegetable choices. Include an assortment of apples, pears, kiwifruit, tangerines, mangoes, dried apricots and melons. Add a tasty crunch to this midday meal with strips of carrots, bell peppers, jicama and sugar snap peas.

Last night's dinner can also serve as today's power packed lunch. Make double portion at dinner or save 1/2 of a restaurant entrée for lunch. Half of a deli sandwich or 2 slices of cold vegetable pizza coupled with a glass of milk and fresh fruit provide a complete nutrient-packed midday meal.

**Avoid post lunch lull.** Maintain mental alertness throughout the afternoon by including protein-rich foods in your lunch. Tyrosine, an amino acid found in protein foods, increases levels of dopamine and norepinephrine. This pair of chemical in the brain activates the Central Nervous system (CNS), which in turn raises energy level and enhances concentration, alertness and performance. A 3-4 oz serving of chicken, fish or lean meat at lunch is sufficient for enhancing afternoon mental performance. Soy or legumes also provide high quality protein. The sustained energy release resulting from consuming whole grains, starchy vegetables and whole fruits also contributes to lasting afternoon energy.

**Go Natural.** For peak nutrient content choose unprocessed or minimally processed lunch items. For instance, a whole apple packs a larger nutrient punch than applesauce, which contains more nutrient than apple juice. The less the food is processed the higher the nutrient content.

**Stay in Season.** Select fruits and vegetables when they are in season locally for optimal taste and nutrient content. Purchasing produce in season will also save money. The Eat Local app provides a monthly listing of seasonal produce by state.

**Plan Ahead.** Packing a lunch can be quick and efficient if food components are at hand. Post a weekly lunch menu to ease the shopping and assembly routine. In addition, designate places in the refrigerator and pantry of lunch foods for easy morning assembly. If time is at a premium in the morning, pack lunches at night. Be sure to have supplies on hand including insulated bags with reusable ice packs, sandwich bags or small storage containers and plastic utensils. A wide-mouth thermos can also be handy for soups or dinner leftovers.

Plan for a productive afternoon with a prepacked lunch. A customized power lunch from home provides fuel for the brain and body. This nutrient packed midday meal yields sustaining energy to focus on project deadlines and afternoon strategy meetings. In addition, this ready-to-eat lunch frees up time—time to rest the mind, time to exercise the body, time to dream. Time and energy—what more could we ask for in a tension-filled, overscheduled society. Start bringing a lunch to work today and see what a difference it makes in your afternoon performance.