

5 Easy Ways to Bag a Waste-Free Lunch

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that the typical brown-bag school lunch would generate 67 pounds of waste per child over a school year. Whether you take a lunch to work or school, here are some easy ways to go greener at every meal.

1. Start with a reusable bag or box.

Forget those boring old brown bags (unless you like them, reuse them many times, and then recycle the paper). The options for lunch bags and boxes now come in cool colors with funky designs for all ages. They are made of a variety of materials; you can find bags from cotton, bamboo, or recycled plastic bags as well as boxes from stainless steel and BPA-free plastic.

2. Add reusable containers.

Once you've got the outside covered, it's time to choose reusable containers for food and drinks. Some of the snazzy new lunch boxes come with smaller eco-friendly boxes, tubs, and bags already nestled inside. Washable margarine tubs and other reusable food packages are a no-cost option. A small insulated beverage bottle is a great investment for hot or cold drinks.

3. Maximize use of leftovers.

Now that we have eco-friendly bags and containers, what about the food? One green way to cut back on kitchen waste is to use leftovers in packed lunches. Entrées can be divided into single servings and put directly into containers for lunch. Meat, fish, or chicken can be sliced for sandwiches, made with leftover salad greens, perfect on an extra whole grain dinner roll.

4. Buy lunch items in bulk.

Single-serve items may seem convenient, but they cost a lot more and make a lot more waste. Save money and the environment by purchasing the largest package you can use. Divide food into your own reusable containers at home. Take a little time on the weekend to make enough small containers of cheese slices, baby carrots, and trail mix for weekday lunches.

5. Keep food safety in the bag.

Food safety should be top-of-mind whenever you pack a lunch. Keep food fresh (hot foods hot and cold foods cold) to prevent foodborne illness. It will also help the environment, since you won't have to throw away spoiled food. Use insulated bottles (for cold drinks and hot soups) along with re-freezing gel packs or small water bottles that can be frozen solid.