

preparing healthy food for work

For most busy members of the midwifery team, finding the time to actually stop and eat at work can be challenging enough, so the thought of putting together a healthy lunch box before we even get there can seem impossible. It's not all about soggy salads and uninspiring sandwiches though, and preparing a meal that is both delicious and good for you isn't as tricky or time-consuming as it might sound.

Eating well when you're on duty helps you to maintain a healthy weight, keeps your energy levels up, contributes to your intake of essential vitamins, minerals and other important nutrients, plus it gives you the chance to pause for a moment – getting you ready for the rest of your shift!

Read on for handy tips on what to include in a healthy lunch box (whatever time of day you're having it), as well as some delicious ideas to spruce up your break time meal and make it your new favourite dish of the day.



aim for balance

Making sure you choose something from each food group is a great start to putting together a lunch box that is balanced and provides a range of nutrients, keeping you feeling full until your next meal. Choose some starchy carbohydrates such as pasta, rice, potatoes or wholemeal bread; add a protein-rich food such as lean meat or poultry, fish, cheese, eggs, beans or tofu; and include some vegetables or salad and a portion or two of fruit. Pop in a fat-free yogurt if you like, don't forget to include a drink (a big bottle of water is ideal), and you're good to go!

Choosing foods which release energy slowly can help combat any mid-shift slumps. Foods rich in fibre are particularly good for providing slow-releasing energy throughout the day. Opt for wholemeal or wholegrain versions of bread, pasta, and rice where possible for a higher-fibre choice. As well as helping you reach your five-a-day target, fruit and veg are also a good source of fibre, so aim to include a portion or two in every meal. These foods are typically low in energy density while satisfying your appetite and help you feel fuller during the rest of the day – meaning you're less likely to reach for the staff room treats! There's no harm in enjoying an occasional 'treat', relying on them too often though can provide excess calories which can lead to weight gain.



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sandwiches

Sandwiches are a quick option that can be easily livened-up with a variety of tasty fillings, and are great for grabbing on the go. Choose wholemeal bread, wraps or pittas and add a delicious filling, such as:

- **Cheeky chicken** – seasoned chicken fillets like tikka or tomato are available in most supermarkets. Alternatively, to make your own, coat chicken in herbs and spices for extra flavour before baking in the oven. Layer a wrap with lettuce and sliced tomato and add your chicken pieces and a tablespoon of extra light mayo before rolling up.
- **Cheesy wonder** – mix together grated cheddar, carrot and a little red onion with fat-free fromage frais for a tangy cheesy-coleslaw style filling.
- **Smoked salmon** – put 40g of smoked salmon trimmings in a bowl, 4 tablespoons of quark, a sprinkle of chives and a squeeze of lemon. Mix well and spread between two slices of wholemeal bread.

If you fancy changing it up, go breadless! Try popping your favourite filling into lettuce cups, or why not have a go at making an omelette wrap? To make the omelette lightly beat 1 egg in a cup and season to taste. Pour the egg mixture into a non-stick pan and tilt it to cover the bottom. Cook for 1½ minutes on each side or until the edges turn golden then loosen with a palette knife and slide on to greaseproof paper. Then wrap around a tasty filling such as sautéed peppers, mushrooms and onions. Add a sprinkle of cheese if you like.



salads

While the word 'salad' can conjure up images of bland lettuce with a few token cherry tomatoes, in reality there are lots of possibilities that can be both healthy and delicious. Include something from each food group to ensure your salad is balanced (eg some vegetables, some starchy carbohydrates, and some protein-rich foods) and experiment with including different textures to keep your salad interesting. For instance, soften some vegetables (peppers and courgettes are great) under the grill to add to a crisp mix of raw veggies and salad leaves; add some cooked pasta, rice or beans to get your teeth into; and top with a tablespoon of toasted nuts or seeds to give some crunch. Some other ideas to get you started include:

- **Lighter chicken Caesar**

For a lighter version of this classic salad, whisk together 200g fat-free natural fromage frais, 1 crushed garlic clove, ½ teaspoon mustard powder, the juice of 1 lemon, 4 level tablespoons freshly grated Parmesan cheese, and season to taste. Pour over chopped cooked chicken breast, lean bacon pieces, lettuce and cherry tomatoes.

- **Chickpea and bulgur wheat salad**

Place bulgar wheat in a large saucepan and pour over vegetable stock. Bring to the boil, cover and simmer for 10-15 minutes until tender and most of the liquid has been absorbed. Stir in dried apricots, chopped onion, chickpeas and seasoning, and simmer for 2 minutes. Add halved cherry tomatoes, spring onions, fresh mint and coriander and gently heat through for a further 3-4 minutes. Stir in lemon juice and fat-free vinaigrette dressing. Serve hot or cold.

- **Rice salad**

In a big bowl, mix together plenty of chopped peppers, celery, radishes, cucumber and cherry tomatoes. Mix in sweetcorn, red kidney beans and cooked rice. Top with mackerel canned in tomato sauce if you fancy.

If you're feeling bored with your usual pasta salad then try some different grains such as couscous, quinoa, bulgur wheat or pearl barley. Or if you're after something warmer why not try noodles on the go? You can make an easy ramen noodle dish by adding some grated carrot, chopped courgette, spring onions, mushrooms and frozen peas to a flask or jar with a lid. Top with some softened noodles, a crumbled vegetable or beef stock cube, 1 teaspoon of miso paste and some soy sauce. Add leftover chicken or prawns if you like. When it comes to lunchtime simply pour over hot water, give it a good stir and enjoy!

snacks

Typically, snacks that are easy to grab like crisps, biscuits, sweets and chocolates can be high in salt, fat and sugar – adding lots of calories and, while they may give you a short energy boost, you can be left feeling unsatisfied. Including healthier snacks in your lunchbox helps to fill you up, supports your intake of important nutrients, and helps to maintain energy levels.

Try including:

- Raw veggies to munch on, such as carrot or cucumber sticks, cherry tomatoes, pickles, peppers, or roasted butternut squash cut into chips. Add in some homemade houmous or a pot of low-fat or fat-free yogurt (stir through some herbs or spices for an extra hit of flavour) to dip into.
- Cooked and cooled chicken drumsticks with the skin removed, lean turkey slices, hardboiled eggs, or a small portion of cheese.
- Homemade frittata packed with veg – make one to keep in the fridge so a slice is ready to be wrapped up for your lunchbox whenever you need.

For a sweet treat:

- Throw in a tub of fresh, chopped fruit to nibble on. Try chunks of pineapple and melon for a refreshing tropical mix, or go for a mix of berries such as strawberries, raspberries and blueberries.
- Low-fat, low-sugar yogurt – even tastier piled onto a fresh fruit salad.
- For those after a chocolate fix, lighter options include a few milk chocolate Mikado sticks, a sachet of Options instant hot chocolate, or a fun-size chocolate bar.

love your leftovers

When you're preparing meals, double the ingredients so you have extra portions on hand for lunches for the week. Having a few extra portions that you can store in a microwavable container and freeze means you have something ready to reheat at work and takes just a little extra planning.

Pasta dishes, chilli, curries, or pre-cooked jacket potatoes are all great options. Or if you've had a roast, whizz any leftover veggies into a soup with some stock, and serve with the meat shredded on top or in a sandwich.

Hopefully you're now full of ideas to take your packed lunch to the next level, whatever time of day you're having it, so it's healthier, tastier, will help you to maintain a healthy weight and keep your energy levels up. Grab your lunch, a bottle of water or a cup of tea, take five, and enjoy!



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