

Hold the Pink Slime: Making School Lunch Healthier

Salad, sandwich and...slime? While the first few options sound like standard fare for a school lunch menu, the option of slime sounds like a Nickelodeon prank gone wrong. Earlier this month, the USDA announced its decision to buy "pink slime" beef product for the National School Lunch Program. Nicknamed for its unsightly appearance, the product in question is actually a beef filler composed of mixed cow bits treated with ammonia.

Controversy has arisen in recent months over the nutritional value of the by-product and the dangers of serving ammonia-treated beef. Though the United States Department of Agriculture maintains that the product is safe for consumption, many industry experts have expressed concern—notably, health advocate and celebrity chef Jamie Oliver called pink slime "bits of sinew" in a condemning video.

In response to widespread public outrage, the USDA has offered a slime-free option with next year's lunch plans. While many schools have banned pink slime until an alternate's available, other school districts continue to serve the filler with no plans for a change. Regardless of where your district stands on the issue, there are steps you can take to make your child's lunch more nutritious. Whether your kid prefers to bring food from home or buy it at school, use these tips to get him a healthier lunch ASAP.



Brown Bag It

- **Grow it yourself.** Since fresh fare can be expensive in stores—a 2007 study published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* found that "junk foods" were cheaper than their healthy counterparts—save money and avoid a carbon footprint by purchasing seeds and growing your greens at home. If your location makes an at-home garden difficult, consider finding a food co-op that offers up locally sourced legumes at a lower price point, or consider splitting a weekly Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) box, full of seasonal fruits and vegetables, with a neighbor.
- **Buy in bulk.** For healthy, non-perishable staples (think peanut butter, nuts, and granola bars), consider buying in bulk from a discounted retailer like Sam's Club or Costco. To avoid pricey fees, offer to split the membership cost with a friend or two.
- **Coupons.** When used wisely, coupons can bring in major savings for you and your family. Recruit your kids to clip cutouts by hand, or subscribe to coupon websites online if you're pinched for time. Make it a habit to quickly search, scan and print the best deals before a trip to the grocery store.
- **Stick to what works:** While it's nice to mix it up a bit, don't feel like you have to re-create the wheel every time you pack another brown bag. If you've found a cheap and healthy go-to that your little one happens to love, such as a peanut butter and banana sandwich, it's okay to repeat it! If you're using healthy ingredients, repeat offenders are no big deal.
- **Farmer's market.** If there's a local produce market in your area, check it out. Local food producers will sell the fruits and veggies in season, so you'll skip paying transportation costs for bananas from Mexico—making your meal cheaper. Plus, it always pays to put money back into the local economy.

Healthier Hot Lunch at School

- **Do your research.** If you aren't sure what's on the menu at your child's school, ask! Seek out the head of the school lunch program, and get the facts on what dishes are being served. Find out where the district stands on pink slime, and ask about other key information, such as the budget the lunch director has to work with, and how your school's fare stacks up against nearby districts.
- **Start small.** Instead of trying to overhaul an entire school lunch program, propose small-scale ideas, such as installing healthier vending machines and eliminating soda from the drink menu. Baby steps pave the way for bigger changes down the line.
- **Speak up.** Get the word out on your effort to make your child's school lunches healthier. Whether you're pushing for vegetarian options or trying to nix pink slime, use every chance you have to let your voice be heard. Meet with the school board, write an op-ed in the local newspaper, or hand out fliers to parents that offer an overview of your position and ideas.
- **Strength in numbers:** Pushing a school district for change is a lot more effective if you've got a crowd of like-minded parents pushing with you. Create a petition that outlines your stance on pink slime, and have parents sign to show their support. Post the petition online so it's easily accessible, and create an email thread that updates supporters on any progress you've made.

While you can't force your child's school to nix pink slime now (or even next year), it's important to realize there are many ways you can make his lunch healthier *without* spending a fortune on organic spinach. Use the tips above to pack a nutritious lunch at home or push for better choices at school: either way, you'll be sure to make a change for the better!