



Ka Ora, Ka Ako | Healthy School Lunches programme

Healthier lunches for ākonga

Information for schools and kura on the Pathway to Nutrition

For some ākonga, a school lunch may be their main meal of the day or the only meal where they eat vegetables and wholegrains. Regular nutritious food is vital for children’s physical, mental and educational development. It affects their ability to focus, concentrate and learn. Ka Ora, Ka Ako provides ākonga with the nutrients their brains and bodies need.

Your school plays a vital role helping ākonga to learn about healthy food and why it is important. Children’s tastes vary and many are not familiar with healthy foods. This can make it challenging to provide healthy food that ākonga want to eat, especially in the first weeks of introducing lunches. They will need support, patience and encouragement to learn and enjoy new foods.

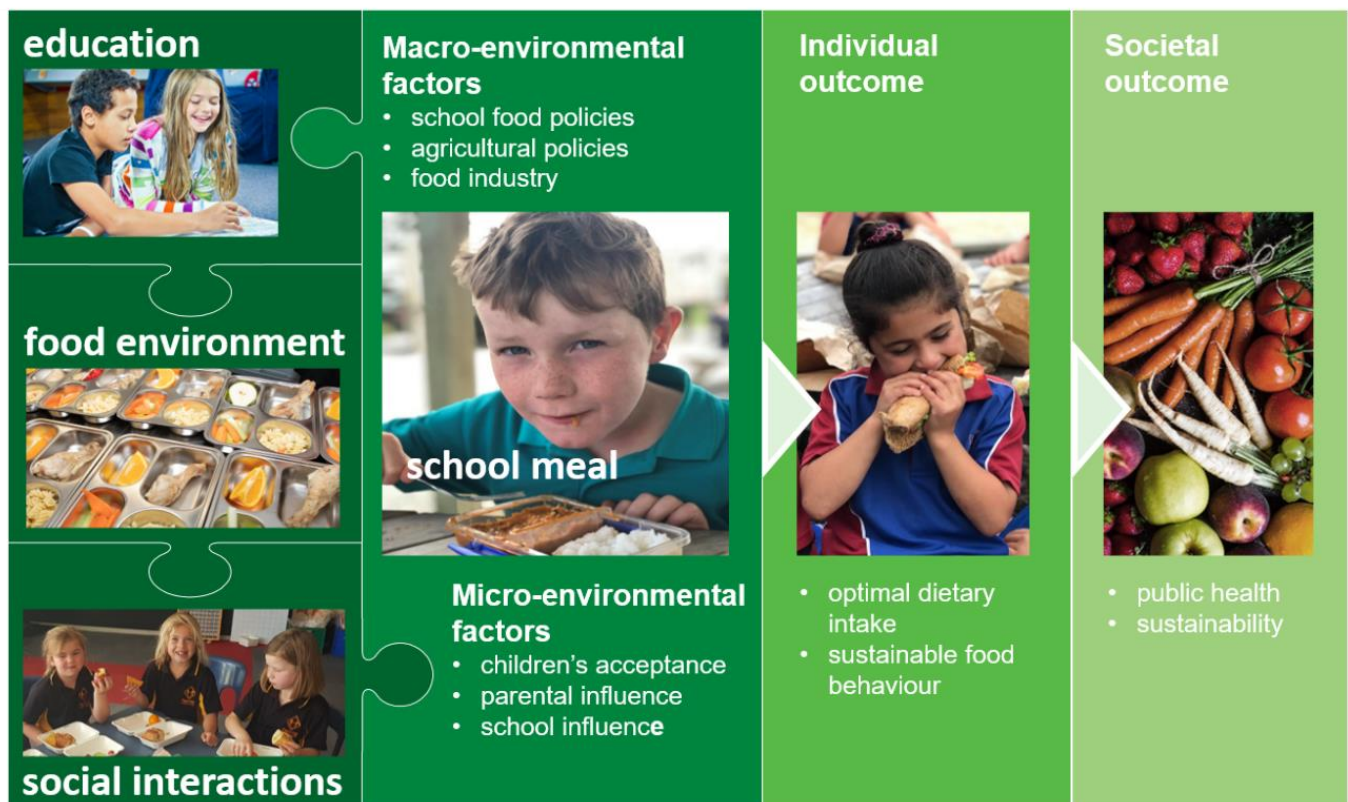
As shown in the diagram below, there are many factors that influence the likelihood of a child eating lunch.

Fast facts

Only 44% of ākonga aged 2-14 get adequate fruit and vegetable intake. (National Health Survey 2019/2020)

On average, children and young people are exposed to **27 advertisements for junk food each day**. ([International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity](#))

At Te Kura o Kimi Ora, although already experienced at providing lunch to around 150 ākonga, the public health nurse noted a **significant reduction in skin infections, from 120 to only eight**, as a result of introducing more nutritious food as part of Ka Ora, Ka Ako.



The Pathway to Nutrition

The Pathway to Nutrition provides information and tips for schools and kura on how they can support and encourage ākongā as they learn to enjoy healthy food, and guidance to suppliers to build and adapt their menus to align with the [Ministry of Health's healthy food and drink guidance for schools](#) and [Ka Ora, Ka Ako nutrition guidance](#), without losing ākongā engagement along the way.

What to expect

Some children may need five to 15 positive experiences with new foods before they learn to like it. This can include touching, smelling, seeing, and tasting the food. While some children adapt faster, others may be less confident and will need more time, and you may see a lot of food wastage when you first start lunches. Many suppliers involved in Ka Ora, Ka Ako reported higher levels of food waste in the first few weeks that steadily reduced as the term progresses, resulting in the majority of ākongā eating the lunch menu by the end of term.

The Ministry is working to guide suppliers as they gradually introduce unfamiliar foods while making sure ākongā are eating and enjoying their lunch. To help plan menus we classify foods and drinks based on their nutritional value using a traffic light system (green, amber and red). Over the first six months of their contract, suppliers are expected to build on a minimum requirement of no red items (junk food) in lunches, to a menu that fully meets the Ka Ora, Ka Ako nutritional guidelines of at least 75 percent green items.

Red items	Amber items	Green items
<ul style="list-style-type: none">» have poor nutritional value» are high in saturated fat, salt and/or added sugars» can contribute to consuming excess kilojoules/calories» are often highly processed food and drinks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» are not part of an everyday diet» may have some nutritional value» are often more processed» in large servings, can contribute to consuming excess kilojoules/calorie.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» are a good source of nutrition» generally lower in saturated fat, salt and added sugar» are mostly whole and less processed» vegetables, fruit, wholegrains, low fat milk products, and legumes, seafood, eggs and meat with fat removed.

As your supplier changes towards a healthier menu, the proportion of green ingredients should increase, and the frequency of amber items should decrease. Some of the changes you may see include:

- » switching from a low fibre white or wheatmeal bread to bread that contains more wholegrains and wholemeal flour
- » introducing a mix of brown and white rice
- » increasing the proportion and variety of vegetables
- » substituting processed meats like ham, lean salami and rindless bacon, with healthier unprocessed proteins like lean meat, chicken, fish, beans and pulses.

Starting point	Simple substitutions	Introducing new foods
<ul style="list-style-type: none">» No red items.» All meals include vegetables.» Meals that set a standard for healthy food but still appeal to ākongā.	<p>Simple substitutions to make meals more nutritious, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">» a sandwich made from one slice of white bread and one of multigrain» a mix of brown and white rice» swapping ham for pulled pork.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» Small amounts of familiar vegetables.» Vegetables hidden in recipes eg pureed through sauces.» Increasing vegetable use as ākongā adapt, such as switching from including in a dish to a full side serving.

We have learnt that this approach works best when schools work with suppliers to understand and promote the reasons for the changes.

Read more about types of foods

[Ka-Ora-Ka-Ako-Nutrition-Guidance-OCT-2020.pdf \(education.govt.nz\)](#)

[Healthy Food and Drink Guidance – Schools | Ministry of Health NZ](#)

How to get the most from lunches

Working with suppliers

Schools can support suppliers change to a healthier lunch menu by providing them with information and regular feedback on:

- » what ākongā typically eat for lunch and what foods are familiar and unfamiliar to them – this helps your supplier work out a starting point appropriate for your school or kura
- » vegetables and fruits ākongā enjoy
- » which foods the majority of ākongā enjoyed and which they did not – think about the whole school not individual, specific children
- » any meals that are popular with ākongā.

The school environment

We have learnt that the environment in which ākongā eat lunch can have a big impact on the success of school lunches. Schools and kura can think about the kaupapa behind what sharing a meal means for your school and what other educational learning you might include on healthy eating to complement the lunch programme.

We have found that in schools experiencing the most success with ākongā trying new food, they:

- » encourage ākongā to try new foods and praise students for their efforts – remember it can take between five and 15 exposures to learn to like a food
- » talk with ākongā about what foods are healthy and why
- » have adults eating alongside ākongā
- » allow students to graze over the course of the day
- » have staff talk positively about the programme and the kai being served
- » share the success of the programme in assemblies, their school newsletter or Facebook page.

Practical activities you might try:



Choose a time for lunch that will give your staff and ākongā the most opportunity to benefit – healthy food tastes better if you are hungry.



Have a process where all ākongā are encouraged to try kai eg a five-bite policy. Encourage but don't force ākongā to eat more if they genuinely do not like it.



Create a time (10-15 minutes), that is solely for eating the provided lunch, while food from home stays in students' bags.



Reward positive eating behaviour.



Incorporate the benefits of healthy eating and what a healthy diet looks like into your curriculum.



Have adults role model and promote healthy eating.

Encouraging ākongā and whānau to have a voice around decisions on what is included in lunches can also play an important role in growing support for school lunches.

Read more about how to include nutrition in the curriculum

[Teaching Resources & Activities | Schools & ELC - Heart Foundation](#)

Support from the Ministry

We work with schools and suppliers to support the introduction of new foods in ways that give ākongā time to learn to enjoy their lunch in a supportive environment. This includes:

- » online (zoom) and in-person education sessions for school staff about key factors that increase uptake of healthy lunches
- » supporting schools with trouble shooting where schools are struggling with ākongā uptake
- » providing a six-month work plan to provide a pathway to providing more nutritious lunches that ākongā enjoy
- » ensuring suppliers meet their contractual obligations, eg providing quality lunches that meet nutritional guidelines
- » reviewing menus and providing guidance to suppliers
- » supporting individual schools and suppliers with challenges and barriers

Further Information

For further information and guidance, please contact your local Ka Ora, Ka Ako | Healthy School Lunches education advisor, or email our team at school.lunches@education.govt.nz

Case in point: Henry Hill School, Napier

According to Principal Jason Williams, before the introduction of Ka Ora, Ka Ako lunches, ākongā at Henry Hill School brought in lunches full of highly processed packaged foods. Knowing what their students typically ate for lunch they were able to adapt to healthy food, by adopting several strategies to support their students to change to healthier foods.

One strategy with a strong impact was having staff sit with ākongā and talk about the food they were eating. Staff found that this approach helped some children who were unsure about the food to 'give it a go'. Another important factor in the school's success with Ka Ora, Ka Ako has been regular open communication with their supplier, so that the supplier knows how they can support the school with uptake of lunches.

Henry Hill School now has students eating healthy food and enjoying their lunch, and teachers have noticed improvements in their classes' concentration levels post lunch. The benefits have gone beyond the school environment, with whānau saying that their children's eating habits at home had also improved.

"We've had classroom teachers talk about being able engage children in learning such as maths in the afternoons – there was no way they could've done that before. They're [ākongā] a lot more wired into learning now."

