

5 Questions to Ask About School Lunches

School meals shape children's daily nutrition, yet hidden ingredients and ultra-processed foods can put their health at risk. Use these five questions to get clarity, demand transparency, and protect your child's well-being.

1. What's really in the food?

Ask for ingredient lists and nutrition labels for all cafeteria meals.

Investigations have found pesticides, heavy metals, and veterinary drugs in school lunches — including lead (100% of samples tested), arsenic, cadmium, and glyphosate. Parents have a right to know what their children are being served.

2. How are foods sourced and prepared?

Are meals made from fresh, minimally processed ingredients, or from ultra-processed foods (like nuggets, pizza, instant soups, packaged desserts)? Studies link ultra-processed foods to obesity, ADHD, diabetes, and even brain changes affecting eating behavior. Ask if your district prioritizes local, organic, or whole-food vendors.

3. How are food safety and nutrition standards enforced?

USDA "meal pattern" rules set minimums — but they don't prevent unsafe additives. Who monitors pesticide levels, heavy metals, and banned chemicals in school meals? Does the school use independent lab testing, or rely solely on USDA claims of being "nutritious"?

4. Can I review the school's menus and policies?

Request monthly menus, vendor contracts, and wellness policy documents. Parents should know how decisions are made about which foods are offered and what standards are followed. Transparency builds trust — lack of transparency should raise red flags.

5. What healthy alternatives can I provide or advocate for?

Ask if you can send your own snacks for parties or keep approved backup snacks in the classroom. Join the wellness committee, PTA, or school board meetings to push for better vendors, ingredient transparency, and more whole-food options. Your involvement can directly improve what's served to all children.

 **Tip for Parents:** Always keep a copy of menus and policies, ask to see ingredient lists, and send healthy backup snacks. If you're not satisfied, consider a DIY lunch approach — and work with other parents to demand safer, more nutritious options.