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Why is My Child's School Nut-Free? What food can she bring?

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From [Victoria Groce](#), for About.com Updated: June 09, 2008
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Question: Why is My Child's School Nut-Free? What food can she bring?

Answer:

The rationale for peanut- and nut-free classrooms and schools has to do with the somewhat unique nature of these allergies. Most people with food allergies -- even severe allergies -- can manage their allergies by simply not eating foods that have their allergens in them. They read labels, don't eat food if they don't know its origins, and ask questions to stay aware of [cross-contamination](#).

People with peanut and tree nut allergies follow all these steps, but there are two limits to this approach. First, it's possible for people with these two allergies to react to traces of nut dust in the air (from peanut shells, for example). Second, nuts are full of natural oils that leave residues. While these residues can be removed with common household cleaners, it can be difficult or impossible to clean tables in the middle of lunch, for example, or for school cleaning staff to know to clean oils off of tainted walls or doorknobs during the school day.

Because of these issues, and because peanut and tree nut allergies can be life-threatening, many schools have responded by designating peanut- or nut-free lunch tables or classrooms, or even by declaring the entire campus peanut- or nut-free. Parents of kids with these allergies learn to read food labels to make sure they're safe, but for parents who are new to packing lunches or snacks for a nut-free classroom, the learning curve can be steep. Additionally, manufacturers in the United States are not required to list the presence of allergenic ingredients on their manufacturing lines.

Here are some rules of thumb for reading labels:

- I Under federal law, peanuts and tree nuts have to be clearly identified in a food label if they're used as an ingredient. Look for the word "peanuts" or a particular type of tree nut -- macadamia nuts, brazil nuts, cashews, almonds, walnuts, pecans, pistachios, chestnuts, beechnuts, hazelnuts, pine nuts (pignoli or pinon), ginkgo nuts or hickory nuts -- in the list of ingredients, or following the word "Contains."
- I Foods that pose a possibility of manufacturing cross-contamination -- that is, where nuts were processed on one line and then another nut-free food was made on the same line, where it could potentially have been contaminated with nuts -- are not allowed in nut-free classrooms. Look for warnings like "may include traces of peanuts" or "manufactured on a shared line with tree nuts." Package notices to the effect of "made in a nut-free facility" indicate safe snacks. Many products, however, include no warnings at all. If you want to pack such a food for your child, check your school's list (if available) or call the manufacturer.
- I Be aware that manufacturing formulations and practices sometimes change. Even if you've bought a safe snack before, take a quick look at the label each time you buy it to make sure the ingredients or cross-contamination warnings haven't changed.

- | Make sure you follow school directions. Some will require that you send snacks in individual packages; others may allow you to divide larger packages of approved foods into smaller servings.

So what kinds of foods *are* good to bring to a nut-free classroom? Here are some ideas. I've not recommended specific brands except for dedicated nut-free companies because ingredients and manufacturing practices can and do change without notice. Your school may provide a list, however, and one good source for current information will be the parent of the classmate with the nut allergy. Always check labels on packaged foods.

- | Fresh fruit. Bananas are popular year-round, apples and pears are great in the fall, and clementines are easy to peel and available through the winter, just to name a few.
- | Cheese. Most cheese is nut-free, including kid-friendly string cheese and convenient cheese cubes.
- | Vegetables. Baby carrots, cherry tomatoes, broccoli, and cauliflower are among the vegetables some kids will eat raw. Small containers of plain yogurt, salad dressing, or sour cream may be good dips.
- | Raisins and other dried fruits.
- | Pudding cups.
- | Air-popped popcorn.
- | Applesauce. The healthiest and most convenient type is unsweetened applesauce in single-serving cups.
- | Fruit snacks.
- | Chips: potato, tortilla, etc.
- | Lunch meat & sandwich bread.
- | Juice, water, soda, and most other beverages.
- | Some cookies, snack cakes, and crackers. These are more likely to contain nuts or to pose cross-contamination risks than other items on this list, so either check labels very carefully or consider buying these items from a nut-free manufacturer such as [Enjoy Life Foods](#) (available nationally).

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