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Greening your Lunchables

The old metal lunch box has certainly gone through a transformation in the past decade, now in schools and workplaces we see every color, fabric, style and size of fashionable bags used to carry lunches. So too has the old way of preparing lunches changed over the years. We are now inundated with hundreds of options of pre-packaged processed foods, making it much more convenient and less time consuming than planning, preparing and packaging our own lunchables.

It may only take a few minutes to consume a pre-packaged meal, but a lifetime for it to expire. As an example, take one quickie microwavable frozen dinner packaged in a plastic container. The lifespan is long: starting with the collection of raw materials (such as oil), to manufacturing, to transporting to the distributor, then to the retail businesses. Even if it is tossed in the recycle bin, it will still need to be transported to the collection facility, then to the recycling facility (which may be overseas) and then, only a portion of the material may actually be usable in the recycling process. Now multiply this by millions. Though we don't see it after it is conveniently tossed away, it doesn't magically disappear. I used to think that frozen dinners were great for lunch at work but after reading an article by David Suzuki, I quit them for good. The article gave me some insight into the entire lifecycle of processed, pre-packaged foods and I haven't consumed a frozen dinner in almost nine years.

There are thousands of fast-food eateries in thousands of cities and thousands of people creating garbage in all corners of this continent every day. And it is no coincidence that fast food businesses thrive in the vicinity of office buildings and schools, sometimes even in them! Statistics show that every schoolchild creates an average of 65 lbs of garbage per year. Multiply that by a class of 25 and you have 1625 lbs. Now try to imagine the pile of garbage created by every school in North America.

I'm not sure when old-fashioned lunchbox lunches became unfashionable. I for one, still have fond memories of my Holly Hobbie lunchbox. Nevertheless, we are now part of a generation that has created more garbage from this one small mid-day meal than any other. Here is what we can find in a typical North American lunch:

- sandwiches sealed in plastic bags;
- fruits and vegetables in plastic bags;
- prepackaged single serving chips, cookies, fruit bars, granola bars, and cheeses;
- prepackaged single serving yogurts, apple sauces, and puddings;
- crackers, pretzels, chips and other snack foods sealed in plastic bags;
- disposable juice boxes, soda cans, water bottles, and milk cartons;
- plastic forks and spoons; and
- paper napkins;

Litter-less lunches, as they are quickly becoming known, are fairly simple to prepare and usually much healthier than disposable options. Preparing a litter-less lunch means that food items can be bought in larger quantities and packaging can be left at home for reuse or recycling. They are not only a wise environmental choice, but easier on the wallet as well! The basic necessities to ensure a litter-less lunch are:

- reusable lunchboxes or lunch bags (preferably insulated);
- cloth napkins;
- stainless-steel forks and spoons;
- homemade sandwiches or other main dishes, fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, and treats;
- reusable drink containers, lunch & snack containers (preferably stainless steel, glass or BPA-free plastics, avoid plastics with triangle codes 3, 6 or 7 and never microwave plastic containers); and
- reusable ice packs to keep food items cold

Still thinking about the convenience factor? Then it's time to change your mindset – view lunch preparation as a way to unwind after a busy day, or to spend time with your kids and involve them in meal preparation so they understand the value of home prepared food. Remember, convenience comes at a cost – a cost to our health, to our wallet and to our environment.

Valerie Hillier is a Frederictonian who lives with the environment in mind. If you would like to contact the Green Matters team email greenmatters@fredericton.ca.