



Nutrition in School Lunch

The nation faces an obesity epidemic with nearly 1 in 3 persons under the age of 18 at risk for preventable diseases like diabetes and heart disease due to overweight and obesity. Health experts say our current generation of children may have a shorter lifespan than their parents.

Since kids may consume as many as half their meals in schools, school meals play a critical role in helping teach how to lead healthy lifestyles. There have been tremendous strides in understanding what a healthy school meal should look like. New standards reflect the latest knowledge about health and nutrition, based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs)– the Federal government’s benchmark for nutrition. Published every 5 years by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the focus of the *Dietary Guidelines* is on disease prevention, health promotion and to help everyone consume a healthy diet.

School Nutrition Plus’s menus are created and planned by chefs and Registered Dietitians and reflect these standards. What does that mean for your school lunch & your health?

- Fresh vegetables and fruit are served every day. Fruit and vegetables should be eaten at EVERY meal (not just school lunch!) and are loaded with the good stuff: vitamins, minerals, fiber, and antioxidants. Our bodies are leaner, stronger, and healthier when we eat lots of plants.
- All grain products are 100% whole grain including bread, buns, tortillas, pasta, and brown rice-that's why they're brown. Whole grains have more fiber than refined flour which is better for your digestive system.
- Portion sizes are limited because of calorie limits. Depending on your age, size, and levels of physical activity, there are recommendations for calorie intake.
- Gradual reductions of sodium content (salt!) in meals because consuming too much salt increases your risk for high blood pressure and heart disease.
- Choice of fat-free white or 1% low-fat white, hormone free milk. Milk is rich in calcium, an essential mineral for bone growth and strength.
- All food is trans-fat free and contains NO artificial sweeteners, or colors. There are many additives and preservatives that have been scientifically proven to impact wellness over time and should be avoided.
- Portions are carefully predetermined to comply with calorie, fat, saturated fat, and sodium restrictions. There are daily and weekly minimums and suggested maximums regulated by the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).
- Reduce added sugars to both comply with regulations and to decrease the risk for disease such as diabetes. Also, eating and drinking sugar is linked to weight gain...even more so than fat consumption.
- The nutrient content of items such as chicken tenders and hamburgers served is different than those sold in fast food restaurants because of NSLP limits on calories, fat, saturated fat and sodium.

Remember, the total combination of foods and beverages consumed over time is more important than the sum of its parts; the big picture of what you make a habit of eating and drinking daily will act synergistically in relation to health. Our goal is to ensure students are provided with quality school lunches that fuel their growing minds and bodies.

1 Follow a healthy eating pattern across the lifespan. All food and beverage choices matter. Choose a healthy eating pattern at an appropriate calorie level to help achieve and maintain a healthy body weight, support nutrient adequacy, and reduce the risk of chronic disease.

2 Focus on variety, nutrient density, and amount. To meet nutrient needs within calorie limits, choose a variety of nutrient-dense foods across and within all food groups in recommended amounts.

3 Limit calories from added sugars and saturated fats and reduce sodium intake. Consume an eating pattern low in added sugars, saturated fats, and sodium. Cut back on foods and beverages higher in these components to amounts that fit within healthy eating patterns.

4 Shift to healthier food and beverage choices. Choose nutrient-dense foods and beverages across and within all food groups in place of less healthy choices. Consider cultural and personal preferences to make these shifts easier to accomplish and maintain.

5 Support healthy eating patterns for all. Everyone has a role in helping to create and support healthy eating patterns in multiple settings nationwide, from home to school to work to communities.

A healthy eating pattern includes:

- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Protein
- Dairy
- Grains
- Oils

A healthy eating pattern limits:

- Saturated fats and trans fats
- Added sugars
- Sodium