



FACT SHEET: CALORIES IN SCHOOL MEALS

This paper provides some explanation and direction for States Agencies and School Food Authorities to use in discussions on the new calorie maximum as well as some tips to improve acceptance of school meals.

School meals play a critical role in helping children learn how to lead healthy lifestyles. The new standards ensure that children have the energy they need to learn in class and be physically active, while reducing their risk for obesity, diabetes, and other serious chronic diseases. The standards are based on the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (DGAs) as well as the recommendations of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) – an independent panel of experts in health, nutrition, school food service, and economics. Under the new science-based standards, school meals are “right-sized” and reflect the appropriate balance between food groups. In addition to lower-fat dairy and leaner proteins, the new school meals offer more whole grains and nearly twice as many fruits and vegetables at lunch. This results in more nutrient-dense, filling meals within age-appropriate calorie requirements.

Naturally, some places are adjusting to the new standards more easily than others. **Patience and support are needed, particularly in this year of transition.** As schools continue to work toward achieving the new requirements throughout the school year, USDA will continue to be there to help them. While initial reports we are hearing from schools and States have been tremendously positive, we also appreciate that not every student has transitioned to taking, or more importantly eating, all the new foods offered. However, it is important that all students consume meals that are filling and provide lasting energy.

What can schools and communities do to help in this transition?

First, educate students about the new standards. USDA data shows that students have tended not to take all the food available to them in the cafeteria line. Increasing understanding about the amount of food that can be selected through colorful signage and simple, repeated messaging to students can help ensure they are getting maximum energy benefit from their meal.

Also, make sure your menus are taking advantage of all the flexibilities available to schools under the new meal standards. **There are no *daily* maximum quantities on grains or meats/meat alternates.** The weekly ranges allow menu planners the flexibility to offer favored items of various sizes and adjust accordingly throughout the week. Additionally, grains and meats/meat alternates are rounded down to the nearest quarter-ounce equivalent for crediting purposes. This also offers flexibility to utilize a variety of items. For instance, a 2.2 ounce chicken breast credits as only 2 ounce equivalents.

Occasional, small quantities of leftovers served on another day will not be counted toward the meal component requirements. They do count toward weekly calorie limits, and States will need to check that they are not being offered excessively. Second servings that are part of the meal *do* count toward the daily and weekly component requirements; seconds offered a la carte are not counted.

Also, **there are no specific maximums on fruits, vegetables or milk.** Schools may choose to allow greater amounts than the required minimums by offering self-serve salad bars or allowing second servings of these components. Additional offerings *do* count toward the weekly calorie limits, but because fruits and vegetables are generally lower in calories, they can be excellent sources for satisfying meals and sustained energy.

Finally, **there are additional options for feeding those very active students.** In addition to making available second helpings of fruits and vegetables (or even milk) at lunch, schools can also structure afterschool snack and supper programs to provide additional foods for those who need them. Many schools have previously found success with parent- or school-run booster clubs and may opt to continue this practice. Individual students and/or sports teams can also supplement food provided through Federal programs with items provided from home or other sources.

Tips and Suggestions for Offering Appealing and Filling School Meals

To offer satisfying meals, schools can consider increasing their offerings of fruits and vegetables beyond the minimum requirements. Some approaches that have achieved success across the country include:

- To boost flavor, offer foods with herbs and spices or lower-sodium sauces. If feasible with calorie limits, prepare foods with heart-healthy fats such as vegetable oils.
- For even more filling meals, encourage more frequent selection of whole fruits and vegetables versus juice, which is digested more quickly.
- Consider innovative products such as potato-based breading, entrée salads, and occasional desserts such as fruited gelatin, baked apples or low-fat pudding that do not contribute to the grains limit.
- Prepare pasta and soup recipes with more vegetables or add legumes and other veggies to meatloaf or pasta sauce for increased fiber and protein. This fills students up and keeps them satisfied all afternoon.
- Refer to *Fruits and Vegetables Galore* for additional tips for promoting fruits and vegetables in the cafeteria (http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/resources/fv_galore.html).

To encourage students to consume foods for which they may not be accustomed, schools may employ multiple strategies, including taste tests, expanding salad bar offerings, using creative marketing and presentation of foods, and offering multiple choices within food components. Other techniques to increase student meal consumption include:

- Engaging students in recipe contests and kitchen tours.
- Working with local chefs in order to develop recipes that are healthful and appealing, and having the chefs both train and demonstrate foods to students, particularly the younger ones.
- Offering classic, favorite dishes while gradually introducing new dishes, or tweaking existing recipes to better align with the updated dietary specifications and portion sizes.
- Employing behavioral economics principles such as attractive fruit displays, eye-catching and mouth watering names for foods, and offering fruits and vegetables at the front of the line before the main dish to remind students to take these items.
- Educating students on farm to table food preparation to increase appreciation for foods in general. For example, start a school garden or invite local farmers to speak to students.
- Providing sufficient time for students to select and consume their entire meals.
- Offering recess prior to lunchtime to increase appetites and students' desire to eat.

Creative methods of implementing the meal pattern requirements increase the likelihood of student acceptance and interest in participating in the school meals programs.