

Guide to the Dietary Specifications for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program



School Year 2025-26 (July 1, 2025, through June 30, 2026)



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Connecticut State Department of Education
Bureau of Child Nutrition Programs
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About this Guide

The Connecticut State Department of Education's (CSDE) *Guide to Meeting the Dietary Specifications for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12* is part of the CSDE's menu planning guidance series for the school nutrition programs (refer to "[CSDE's Menu Planning Guidance Series](#)" in this section). This guide provides strategies and resources to assist school food authorities (SFAs) with meeting the required weekly dietary specifications (nutrition standards) for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) meal patterns for grades K-12 in the [National School Lunch Program \(NSLP\)](#), [School Breakfast Program \(SBP\)](#), and [Seamless Summer Option \(SSO\)](#) of the NSLP. Meals offered in the SSO follow the NSLP and SBP meal pattern requirements.

The requirements in this guide apply to all public schools, private schools, and residential child care institutions (RCCIs) that participate in the NSLP, SBP, and SSO.

This guide reflects the USDA regulations and policies in effect as of the publication date. Please note that this information may change. The CSDE will update this guide whenever the USDA issues new meal pattern guidance for the school nutrition programs. Please check the CSDE's [Menu Planning Guidance for School Meals for Grades K-12](#) webpage for the most current version. This document is available at https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/mpg/guide_menu_documentation_nsdp_sbp_k12.pdf.

The mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations does not imply approval or endorsement by the CSDE or the USDA. Product names are used solely for clarification.

Questions regarding this guide may be directed to Susan Fiore, MS, RD, Nutrition Education Coordinator, at 860-807-2075 or susan.fiore@ct.gov.

CSDE's Menu Planning Guidance Series

The CSDE's menu planning guidance series includes five comprehensive guides designed to assist SFAs with meeting the NSLP and SBP meal pattern and meal service requirements for grades K-12.

- Guide to the Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program
- Guide to the Dietary Specifications for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12
- Crediting Guide for the School Nutrition Programs Crediting Guide for the School Nutrition Programs (applies to the NSLP, SBP, and ASP meal patterns for grades K-12 and preschool)
- Guide to Menu Documentation for the School Nutrition Programs Crediting Guide for the School Nutrition Programs (applies to the NSLP, SBP, and ASP meal patterns for grades K-12 and preschool)
- Guide to Meal Service Requirements for Grades K-12 in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program

These guides are available on the CSDE's [Menu Planning Guidance for School Meals for Grades K-12](#) webpage.

CSDE Contact Information

For questions regarding the NSLP, SBP, and SSO, please contact the school nutrition programs staff in the CSDE's Bureau of Child Nutrition Programs.

County	CSDE School Nutrition Programs Staff
Middlesex County (includes Regions 4, 13, and 17) Tolland County (includes Regions 8 and 19) RCCIs: Adelbrook, Inc. – The Children's Home	Jennifer Bove 860-807-2044 jennifer.bove@ct.gov
Fairfield County (includes Region 9) Litchfield County (includes Regions 1, 7, 12, 14, and 20) School wellness policies	Fionnuala Brown 860-807-2129 fionnuala.brown@ct.gov
Hartford County (includes Region 10 and the Connecticut Technical Education & Career System [CTECS]) RCCIs: Department of Children and Family Services, Department of Corrections, Judicial Department	Teri Dandeneau 860-807-2079 teri.dandeneau@ct.gov
New Haven County (includes Regions 5, 15, and 16) RCCIs: Children's Center, Boys & Girls Village, Inc.	Greg King 860-713-6804 greg.king@ct.gov
New London County Windham County (includes Region 11) RCCIs: Waterford Country School Claims processing	Susan Alston 860-807-2081 susan.alston@ct.gov

For a list of all CSDE Child Nutrition Programs staff, refer to the CSDE's [Child Nutrition Staff and Responsibilities](#).

Abbreviations and Acronyms

APP	alternate protein product
AR	Administrative Review
ASP	Afterschool Snack Program of the NSLP
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CN	Child Nutrition
CNP	Child Nutrition Programs
CSDE	Connecticut State Department of Education
DRIs	Dietary Reference Intake
FBG	Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs (USDA)
FDA	Food and Drug Administration
FNS	Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture
HHFKA	Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (Public Law 111-296)
ICN	Institute of Child Nutrition
LEA	local educational agency
MMA	meats/meat alternates
NSLP	National School Lunch Program
oz eq	ounce equivalents
PFS	product formulation statement
RCCI	residential child care institution
RDAs	Recommended Dietary Allowances
SBP	School Breakfast Program
SFA	school food authority

SSO	Seamless Summer Option of the NSLP
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
WGR	whole grain-rich

For additional guidance, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Common Acronyms and Abbreviations in the School Nutrition Programs](#).

1 — Introduction

Schools and institutions that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) must offer meals that comply with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) meal patterns for the school nutrition programs, which include the weekly dietary specifications (nutrition standards). SFAs that meet the meal pattern requirements may claim reimbursement for meals served to children.

School meals as averaged over the week must meet the weekly dietary specifications for calories (minimum and maximum levels), saturated fat, and sodium. The dietary specifications apply separately to breakfast and lunch menus.

This guide provides specific menu planning strategies and resources to help school food authorities (SFAs) meet the required calorie ranges for school meals, reduce added sugars, and meet the weekly limits for saturated fat and sodium. Training on the dietary specifications is available in [Module 6: Dietary Specifications](#) of the CSDE's training program, *What's in a Meal: Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the School Nutrition Programs*.

Background

The [Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010](#) (Public Law 111-296) of 2010 required the USDA to update the nutrition standards for the NSLP and SBP meal patterns for grades K-12 to reflect current dietary science based on the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#). The resulting nutrition standards (known as dietary specifications) were defined by the 2012 USDA final rule, [Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs](#). These standards were effective July 1, 2012, with the sodium reduction targets phased in over several years beginning July 1, 2014.

The USDA's dietary specifications for school meals are based on the [Dietary Reference Intakes \(DRIs\)](#) and the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#). The DRIs are a common set of reference values developed by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) that represent the most current scientific knowledge on nutrient needs of healthy populations. The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* is a document developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the USDA that provides science-based advice for Americans ages 2 and older to promote health and reduce risk for chronic diseases through diet and physical activity.

Through June 30, 2024, the dietary specifications included weekly calorie ranges (minimum and maximum levels) and limits for saturated fat and sodium. They also required that all food products or ingredients used for school meals must contain zero grams of synthetic trans fat per serving.

Effective July 1, 2024, the USDA final rule, [Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#), removed the dietary specification prohibiting synthetic trans fat in school meals, and in foods sold to children on campus during the school day under the USDA's Smart Snacks nutrition standards for competitive foods. This change eliminated a requirement that the USDA determined is no longer necessary due to the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) actions that eliminated synthetic trans fat from the U.S. food supply by 2021.

Effective July 1, 2027, the USDA final rule requires a weekly dietary limit for added sugars of less than 10 percent of calories. This weekly limit will be in addition to the new product-based limits for added sugars in breakfast cereals, yogurt, and flavored milk that take effect on July 1, 2025. For guidance on meeting the product-based limits for added sugars, refer to the CSDE's [Crediting Guide for the School Nutrition Programs](#), and visit the CSDE's [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

Effective January 14, 2026, the [Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025](#) amends the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act to revise the requirements for milk and fluid milk substitutes in the NSLP. This law modifies the dietary specifications for the NSLP only, to exclude fluid milk from the weekly limit for saturated fat at lunch. For more information, refer to "[Saturated fat exemption for fluid milk](#)" in section 4.

Overview of Dietary Specifications

The dietary specifications are the USDA's nutrition standards for the NSLP and SBP meal patterns for grades K-12. They do not apply to the ASP meal patterns for grade K-12 or to the NSLP, SBP, and ASP preschool meal patterns.

The current dietary specifications include weekly calorie ranges and weekly limits for saturated fat and sodium. Effective July 1, 2027, the USDA final rule, [Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) requires a new dietary specification for added sugars (less than 10 percent of calories).

All foods and beverages offered as part of reimbursable meals count toward the weekly dietary specifications, including additional servings of the meal components, and noncreditable foods offered with reimbursable meals, such as condiments, potato chips, pudding, ice cream, gelatin, cream cheese, and bacon (refer to the resource, [Noncreditable Foods in the Meal Patterns for the School Nutrition Programs](#)). These foods and beverages are included in the CSDE's nutrient

analysis of school menus when a nutrient analysis is required as part of the Administrative Review of the school nutrition programs. For more information, visit the “[Nutrient Analysis](#)” section of the CSDE’s Program Guidance for School Nutrition Programs webpage.

Overview of Breakfast and Lunch Meal Patterns

The breakfast and lunch meal patterns for grades K-12 use a food-based menu planning approach for three required grade groups (K-5, 6-8, and 9-12). The meal patterns for each grade group require minimum daily and weekly portions of:

- five meal components for lunch, which include milk, fruits, vegetables, grains, and meats/meat alternates (MMA); and
- three meal components for breakfast, which include milk, fruits (including vegetable substitutions), and grains/MMA.

In addition, the average weekly nutrition content of all lunches for each grade group, and separately for all breakfasts for each grade group, must meet the weekly dietary specifications.

The USDA also permits four optional meal patterns for grades K-12 that allow SFAs to use the same meal pattern for students in different grade groups. These include the optional lunch meal pattern for grades K-8 and the optional breakfast meal patterns for grades K-8, 6-12, and K-12. These options are useful for schools and institutions with grade configurations that prevent students from being separated into the three required grade groups. Examples include schools with grades K-8 or grades 5-8, where students from different grade groups eat together during the same lunch period.

The NSLP and SBP meal patterns for grades K-12 are available on the CSDE’s [Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs](#). Detailed guidance on the meal pattern requirements is available in the CSDE’s [Guide to the Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program](#). Training on the meal patterns is available in the CSDE’s training program, [What’s in a Meal: Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the School Nutrition Programs](#).

Offering Nutritious School Meals

The USDA’s meal patterns are designed to provide nutritious school meals that meet the calorie and nutrient needs of each grade group. However, the actual nutritional content of school menus ultimately depends on the decisions made by the menu planner. The local school district’s approach to menu planning, purchasing, and meal preparation procedures have a significant impact on the overall nutritional quality of school meals. For example, different choices within the same meal component can vary greatly in nutrient content.

- **Grains:** A 1-ounce equivalent (oz eq) serving of 100 percent whole-grain bread provides more fiber and nutrients, and less fat than a 1-oz eq blueberry muffin made with 50 percent whole-grain flour and 50 percent enriched flour.
- **Fruits:** A $\frac{1}{2}$ -cup serving of fresh fruit salad provides fiber, and more nutrients and less calories than $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of 100 percent apple juice.
- **Vegetables:** A $\frac{1}{2}$ -cup serving of baked potato provides more fiber and nutrients, and less calories, fat, and sodium than $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of oven-baked french fries.
- **MMA:** A 1-oz eq serving of skinless turkey breast provides less calories, fat, and sodium than a 1-oz eq serving of beef salami.

The CSDE strongly encourages menu planners to choose the most nutritious options within each meal component. Additionally, districts should use purchasing and preparation methods that reduce solid fats, added sugars, and sodium in school meals. These strategies support compliance with USDA's weekly dietary specifications and help promote healthier school meals.

Resources for Dietary Specifications

The nutrition and menu planning resources provide information to assist SFAs with meeting the dietary specifications.

- [Added Sugars](https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/school-nutrition-standards-updates/added-sugars) (USDA):
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/school-nutrition-standards-updates/added-sugars>
- [Checking for Dietary Specifications: Chapter 3: Menu Development](https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/menu-planner) (USDA's Menu Planner for School Meals):
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/menu-planner>
- [Dietary Specifications](https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/meal-patterns-school-nutrition-programs/dietary-specifications) (CSDE's Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Program webpage):
<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/meal-patterns-school-nutrition-programs/dietary-specifications>
- [Dietary Specifications for Grade Groups: Chapter 2: Food-Based Menu Planning](https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/menu-planner) (USDA's Menu Planner for School Meals):
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/menu-planner>
- [Menu Planning for Child Nutrition Programs](https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/menu-planning) (CSDE webpage):
<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/menu-planning>

- [Recipes for Child Nutrition Programs](https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/menu-planning#Recipes) (CSDE's Menu Planning for Child Nutrition Programs webpage):
<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/menu-planning#Recipes>
- [Reducing Added Sugars at School Breakfast](https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/sbp/reducing-added-sugars) (USDA):
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/sbp/reducing-added-sugars>
- [Reducing Added Sugars at School Breakfast: Menu Planning Tips](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVEnHQSGicI) (USDA webinar):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVEnHQSGicI>
- [Sodium Limits for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for School Meals for Grades K-12](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/nslp/mealpattern/sodium_limits_nslp_sbp.pdf) (CSDE):
https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/nslp/mealpattern/sodium_limits_nslp_sbp.pdf
- [USDA Memo SP 01-2026: Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025 – Implementation Requirements for the National School Lunch Program](https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/wmfhka-implementation):
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/wmfhka-implementation>
- [Weekly Calorie Ranges for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/nslp/mealpattern/calorie_ranges_nslp_sbp.pdf) (CSDE):
https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/nslp/mealpattern/calorie_ranges_nslp_sbp.pdf
- [What's in a Meal Module 6: Dietary Specifications](https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/meal-pattern-training-materials#module6) (CSDE's Training Program, What's in a Meal: Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the School Nutrition Programs):
<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/meal-pattern-training-materials#module6>

Links to these and other resources are available in the “[Dietary Specifications](#)” section of CSDE’s Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

Recipe Resources

The USDA’s [Recipes for Healthy Kids Cookbook for Schools](#) features healthy standardized recipes that are low in saturated fat, added sugars, and sodium; and include more dark green and orange vegetables, dry beans, peas, and lentils, and whole grains. The Institute of Child Nutrition’s (ICN) [Child Nutrition Recipe Box](#) website is a searchable collection of standardized recipes and other resources for the federal nutrition assistance programs. For additional resources, visit the “[Recipes for Child Nutrition Programs](#)” section of CSDE’s [Menu Planning for Child Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

Guidance on Meeting the Meal Pattern Requirements

The resources below provide SFAs with information and guidance on meeting the meal pattern requirements for the school nutrition programs.

- Links to the USDA's regulations and final rules for the meal patterns for the school nutrition programs are available on the CSDE's [Laws and Regulations for Child Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.
- The USDA provides guidance for implementing the school nutrition programs through the policy memos on their [FNS Documents & Resources](#) webpage.
- The CSDE's [Operational Memoranda for School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage provides links to relevant USDA memos by year, and includes memos from the CSDE Bureau of Child Nutrition Programs on the requirements for the school nutrition programs.
- The CSDE's [Program Guidance for School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage provides an alphabetical listing of links to information and guidance on the federal and state requirements for the school nutrition programs, including the meal patterns and dietary specifications, crediting foods and beverages, menu documentation, and meal service.
- The CSDE's weekly e-newsletter for school nutrition programs, [School Lunch Tray \(SLT\)](#), provides important guidance and resources to help SFAs comply with the federal and state requirements, and identifies deadlines for completing required activities and submitting required reports.
- The CSDE hosts Table Talk webinars several times each month during the school year to review key topics and information contained in the SLT, as well as more in-depth training and information sessions on current topics. The schedule and registration information for the Table Talk webinars are available in the SLT.
- The CSDE's [Training for Child Nutrition Programs](#) webpage provides links to recorded trainings on a variety of topics, including the CSDE's training program, [What's in a Meal: Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the School Nutrition Programs](#).
- The CSDE's [Manuals and Guides for Child Nutrition Programs](#) webpage provides links to guides on a variety of topics, including food safety, menu planning and meal patterns, program administration, school wellness, and special diets.

SFAs may contact their assigned [school nutrition team member](#) for more information and program-specific questions.

2 — Calories

The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommends a healthy eating pattern that meets food group needs with nutrient-dense foods and beverages and stays within calorie limits. The NSLP meal patterns are designed to meet about one-third of children's daily requirements for calories and key nutrients. The SBP meal patterns are designed to meet about one-fourth of children's daily requirements for calories and key nutrients.

USDA Dietary Specification for Calories

The dietary specifications require weekly age-appropriate minimum and maximum calorie levels for lunches and breakfasts offered to each grade group. Table 2-1 summarizes the calorie ranges for the meal patterns for the three required grade groups (K-5, 6-8, and 9-12); the optional lunch meal pattern for grades K-8 and the optional breakfast meal patterns for grades K-8, 6-12, and K-12.

The USDA allows optional meal patterns for grades K-8 at breakfast and lunch and grades 6-12 and grades K-12 at breakfast because the required meal pattern servings and dietary specifications for these grade groups overlap. However, these meal pattern options require a narrower calorie range and more restrictive sodium limit than the regular meal patterns (refer to [table 5-1](#) and [table 5-2](#)). Optional meal patterns are not available for grades 6-12 or grades K-12 at lunch because the required calorie ranges for grades 6-8 and grades 9-12 do not overlap.

School meals offered on average over the week must be within the specific calorie range for each grade group. Individual meals offered may be above or below the calorie range. The calorie ranges do not apply to meals selected by individual students. Student selections may be above or below the weekly ranges.

The CSDE's resource, [Weekly Calorie Ranges for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12](#), provides a summary of these requirements.



Table 2-1. Weekly calorie ranges for grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP

Grade group	Breakfast	Lunch
K-5	350-500	550-650
6-8	400-550	600-700
9-12	450-600	750-850
K-8 option	400-500	600-650
6-12 option	450-550	Not applicable
K-12 option	450-500	Not applicable

Calorie Deviations for Developmental Issues

On a case-by-case basis, schools are allowed to offer age-appropriate meals to individual students in unique situations, such as older or younger students who are placed in the grade group for developmental or other exceptional reasons. An example is a 16-year-old teen with developmental issues who is placed with students in grades K-5. SFAs must seek written permission from the CSDE prior to deviating from the required meal pattern for the prevalent grade group.

Calories for Students with Special Energy Needs

The USDA designed the nutrition standards for school meals based on age-appropriate nutrition and physical activity habits of the average student. Meals for students with special energy needs (such as athletes and pregnant teens), who may require additional calories and protein, must still meet the weekly calorie limits.

Schools can provide opportunities for all students to select additional meal components if the breakfast and lunch menus do not exceed the weekly calorie limit. Students may obtain extra needed calories from other USDA school nutrition programs, such as afterschool snacks in the Afterschool Snack Program (ASP) and can also purchase additional a la carte foods.

Meeting the Weekly Calorie Ranges

The daily and weekly servings of each meal component in the NSLP and SBP meal patterns are intended to meet the minimum and maximum calories for each grade group. Depending on the types and quantities of foods offered in school meals, SFAs may need to modify school menus to increase or decrease calories.

Strategies for Increasing Calories with Nutrient-dense Foods

When school menus do not meet the minimum weekly calories, SFAs must adjust menus to increase calories to the appropriate level for each grade group. Menu planners should focus on adding calories from nutrient-dense foods, following the recommendations of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

Nutrient-dense foods are naturally rich in fiber and other nutrients. They contain relatively few calories and provide a variety of health benefits, such as decreasing the risk of cardiovascular disease. Examples of nutrient-dense foods include fruits, vegetables (especially the dark green subgroup, red/orange subgroup, and beans, peas, and lentils subgroup), whole grains, low-fat or nonfat dairy products, lean meat, skinless poultry, fish, and eggs.

When school menus require additional calories, menu planners should increase servings of naturally nutrient-dense, fiber-rich, complex carbohydrate foods. Focus on offering more vegetables (especially the dark green subgroup, red/orange subgroup, and beans, peas, and lentils subgroup), fruits, and whole grains.

The general recommendations below assist menu planners with adjusting menus to increase nutrient-dense foods in school meals.

- Include whole unprocessed or minimally processed fruits and vegetables most often.
- Increase the frequency of beans, peas, and lentils, such as kidney beans, lentils, black beans, lentils, split peas, and garbanzo beans (chickpeas). For crediting information, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Beans, Peas, and Lentils in the School Nutrition Programs](#).
- Provide additional servings of vegetables and fruits. For example, serve three kinds of fruits or vegetables instead of two.
- Increase the serving size of vegetables and fruits, as appropriate to the grade group being served.
- Increase the frequency of whole-grains, such as whole-wheat pasta, whole-grain breads, oatmeal, bulgur, and brown rice. For information on whole grains, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Whole Grains in the School Nutrition Programs](#).

The guidance below assists SFAs with adjusting school menus that fall below the minimum weekly calories. These strategies focus on increasing nutrient-dense, fiber-rich, complex

carbohydrate foods through menu planning, purchasing, meal preparation, and modifying recipes.

The foods and ingredients listed below may or may not credit in reimbursable school meals. For more information, refer to the USDA's [Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#) and the CSDE's [Crediting Guide for the School Nutrition Programs](#), and visit the CSDE's [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

Menu planning

- Choose nutrient-dense foods that are naturally high in fiber, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
- Plan menus to include more 100 percent whole-grain products than whole grain-rich (WGR) products. For information on whole grains, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Whole Grains in the School Nutrition Programs](#).
- Add more beans, peas, and lentils (e.g., chickpeas, lentils, and pinto beans) and whole grains (e.g., barley, bulgur, and brown rice) to menus and recipes. Some examples include:
 - serving beans, peas, and lentils instead of meat, poultry, or cheese dishes at least once a week;
 - serving more side dishes made with beans, peas, and lentils such as three-bean salad, split pea or lentil soup, and hummus (pureed garbanzo beans);
 - using whole or pureed beans to replace some or all of the meat in entree recipes like chili, burritos, and tacos; and
 - adding beans, peas, and lentils to commercial foods, like adding kidney beans to commercial minestrone soup.
- To increase the acceptability of new food items to students, plan nutrition education activities and taste tests. For taste-testing resources, visit the USDA's [Taste-Testing Event Resources](#) webpage. For resources on beans, peas, and lentils, refer to "[Beans, Peas, and Lentils](#)" in the "Meats and Meat Alternates" section of the CSDE's Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

- Serve fresh fruits and vegetables instead of fruit and vegetable juices. Juice is not nutritionally equivalent to whole fruits and vegetables and provides more calories.
- Serve whole or cut-up fruits and vegetables most often. Serve fresh fruits instead of canned fruits. Serve a variety of raw vegetables regularly.
- Serve whole-grain pasta-vegetable salads made with low-fat dressings.
- Serve baked potatoes instead of mashed potatoes.
- Serve more salads and offer a variety of vegetable and fruit ingredients.
- Serve 100 percent whole-grain breakfast cereals most often, including ready-to eat (RTE) breakfast cereals and hot breakfast cereals like oatmeal or buckwheat.
- Serve applesauce and other fruit purees (like strawberries or blueberries) as an alternative to maple syrup on pancakes and waffles.
- Serve dried fruits (such as raisins or dried apricots) or a trail mix containing dried fruits and whole-grain low-sugar cereals.
- Add vegetable-based soups to the menu. **Crediting note:** Only certain types of commercial vegetable soups credit in school meals. Soups made from scratch credit based on the amount of vegetables in the standardized recipe. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resource, [*Crediting Soups in the School Nutrition Programs*](#).

Purchasing

- Request that vendors provide nutrition information for all products. Read Nutrition Facts labels and ingredients to identify products that are naturally high in fiber (refer to "[How to Read a Food Label](#)" in section 6).
- Compare brands before purchasing to determine if a comparable product is higher in fiber.
- Purchase a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables regularly.
- Purchase cruciferous vegetables frequently, such as broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, and Brussels sprouts.
- Purchase 100 percent whole-grain foods most often. Write food specifications to include more 100 percent whole-grain foods, e.g., whole-grain bread products, oatmeal, quinoa, and brown rice. Make sure that the products received are the ones specified. For

information on whole grains, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Whole Grains in the School Nutrition Programs](#).

- Purchase foods from the beans, peas, and lentils subgroup frequently. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resources, [Vegetable Subgroups in the National School Lunch Program](#) and [Crediting Beans, Peas, and Lentils in the School Nutrition Programs](#).
- Compare product information and purchase whole-grain breakfast cereals containing at least 2.5 grams of fiber per manufacturer's serving (refer to "[How to Read a Food Label](#)" in section 6). At least 5 grams of fiber per serving is ideal.

Meal preparation

- Add whole-grain pasta, brown rice, quinoa, and other whole grains to soups, stews, and casseroles.
- Sprinkle oat bran or wheat germ over salad, soups, breakfast cereals, and yogurt.
- Use crushed whole-grain unsweetened RTE breakfast cereals or rolled oats as breading for baked fish and chicken.
- Serve fruits and vegetables with their skins.

Modifying recipes

The USDA requires that SFAs develop and follow standardized recipes for all foods prepared from scratch. For more information, refer to the Institute of Child Nutrition's [USDA Recipe Standardization Guide for School Nutrition Programs](#) and visit the "[Standardized Recipes](#)" section of the CSDE's Crediting Documentation for the Child Nutrition Programs webpage.

- For baked goods like muffins and breads, add chopped dried fruits without added sugars (e.g., apricots, raisins, dates, figs, and prunes), finely chopped nuts, oatmeal, and pureed vegetables and fruits (e.g., canned pumpkin and applesauce).
- Substitute whole-wheat flour or other whole-grain flours for enriched white flour.
- Use whole-grain products (e.g., whole-grain bread, cracker crumbs, or RTE breakfast cereals) as a topping for casseroles or breading for chicken.

- Add rolled oats to entree recipes like meatloaf, tacos, and meat sauce.
- Add lentils or bulgur to hamburger dishes. **Crediting note:** Bulgur is a whole grain and credits as the grains component. Lentils credit as either the vegetables or MMA component but cannot credit as both meal components in the same meal (refer to the CSDE's resource, [*Crediting Beans, Peas, and Lentils in the School Nutrition Programs*](#)).
- Add beans, peas, and lentils (whole, mashed, or pureed) such as kidney beans, lentils, black beans, and garbanzo beans (chickpeas) to entrees, stews, side dishes, and salads. For example, add black beans to burritos and add lentils to brown rice pilaf. **Crediting note:** Beans, peas, and lentils credit as either the vegetables or MMA component but cannot credit as both meal components in the same meal (refer to the CSDE's resource, [*Crediting Beans, Peas, and Lentils in the School Nutrition Programs*](#)).
- Add beans, peas, or lentils to commercial soups. For example, add kidney beans to canned minestrone soup or black beans to vegetable soup. **Crediting note:** Only certain types of commercial vegetable soups credit in school meals. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resource, [*Crediting Soups in the School Nutrition Programs*](#).
- Add pureed beans to taco mix, meat sauce, and similar entrees to thicken the mixture and take on the flavor of the dish. **Crediting note:** Pureed beans in entrees credit as the MMA component but not the vegetables component unless the food also contains an adequate amount of recognizable creditable vegetables.
- Use 100 percent whole-grain bread to make bread items like French toast and garlic bread.
- Increase the amount of whole grains (e.g., brown rice, quinoa, and whole-grain pasta) and vegetables in stews, soups, casseroles, and similar entrees.



Strategies for Decreasing Calories

When school menus exceed the weekly calorie limit, the menu planner must adjust menus to decrease calories to the appropriate level for each grade group. The general recommendations below help menu planners to decrease calories in school meals.

- Focus on replacing foods that are higher in saturated fat and added sugars with lower calorie, nutrient-dense foods such as fruits and vegetables.
- Reduce the frequency of noncreditable foods like ice cream and condiments in school meals. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Noncreditable Foods in the Meal Patterns for the School Nutrition Programs](#).
- Eliminate or limit additional portions of foods that are not required to meet the daily and weekly meal pattern requirements.

Specific strategies to meet these recommendations are provided below.

- **Serve less juice.** Juice contains more calorie than whole fruits and vegetables. For example, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of grape juice contains about 80 calories while $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of fresh grapes contains about 52 calories. In addition, juice does not provide the same nutritional benefits as whole fruits.
- **Serve less canned fruit.** Canned fruits in juice and light syrup contain more calories than whole fruits and canned fruits in water. Substituting whole fruits for canned fruits decreases calories and provides more nutrients. For example, 1 cup of peaches in juice (109 calories) and 1 cup of peaches in light syrup (136 calories) contain about twice the calories as 1 cup of fresh peaches (60 calories) and 1 cup of canned peaches in water (59 calories).
- **Serve dried and frozen fruits without added sugar.** Read Nutrition Facts labels and ingredients to identify products that do not contain added sugars. Offer these fruits most often (refer to "[How to Read a Food Label](#)" in section 6).
- **Use low-fat dairy products in school recipes.** Decrease calories and saturated fat in school recipes by substituting low-fat or fat-free dairy products for full-fat dairy products. For example substitute low-fat cheese for regular cheese, substitute fat-free yogurt for regular yogurt, and substitute low-fat or fat-free milk for whole or reduced-fat (2%) milk.
- **Serve whole or cut-up fruits and vegetables most often.** Whole fruits and vegetables are low in calories and high in nutrients.

- **Limit additional servings of MMA.** Serve only enough of the MMA component to meet the minimum daily and weekly requirements for each grade group. Additional amounts of MMA provide more calories and may provide more saturated fat and sodium.
- **Limit or eliminate high-fat commercial processed MMA products.** Write purchasing specifications to limit the fat content of commercial MMA products like pizza, chicken nuggets, luncheon meats, hot dogs, and sausages.
- **Use reduced-fat or low-fat cheese.** Purchase commercial products made with reduced-fat or low-fat cheese and modify recipes.
- **Limit additional servings of grains.** Serve only enough of the grains component to meet the minimum daily and weekly requirement for each grade group. Additional servings of grains provide more calories.
- **Eliminate grain-based desserts.** Grain-based desserts are typically higher in calories, solid fats, and added sugars. Examples include brownies, cookies, cakes, cupcakes, coffee cakes, pies, cinnamon rolls, doughnuts, cereal bars, granola bars, breakfast bars, sweet rolls, pastries, and toaster pastries. **Crediting note:** Certain grain-based desserts do not credit in the SBP. Grain-based desserts cannot credit for more than 2 oz eq per week in the NSLP (refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Grain-based Desserts in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12](#)).
- **Limit the frequency and amount of noncreditable foods.** Noncreditable foods typically contain few nutrients and are higher in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium. Examples include bacon, potato chips, pudding, gelatin, ice cream, jam, maple syrup, butter, cream cheese, salad dressing, ketchup, mayonnaise, and mustard. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Noncreditable Foods in the Meal Patterns for the School Nutrition Programs](#).

The strategies for reducing added sugars and saturated fat also help to reduce calories (refer to [“Strategies for Reducing Added Sugars”](#) in section 3 and [“Strategies for Limiting Saturated fat”](#) in section 4).

Resources for Calories

The resources below provide information on the weekly calorie ranges for school meals.

- [Calories](#) (“Dietary Specifications” section of CSDE’s Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage):
<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/meal-patterns-school-nutrition-programs/dietary-specifications#Calories>
- [Weekly Calorie Ranges for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12](#) (CSDE):
https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/nslp/mealpattern/calorie_ranges_nslp_sbp.pdf

For additional resources, visit the “[Dietary Specifications](#)” section of the CSDE’s Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage.



3 — Added Sugars

The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommends limiting added sugars to less than 10 percent of daily calories. This recommendation is intended to help people achieve a healthy eating pattern by meeting nutrient and food group needs through nutrient-dense food and beverage choices, while staying within calorie limits. Eating patterns that include lower intake of added sugars are associated with reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes, and some types of cancer. Research shows that it is difficult for people to meet their nutrient needs while staying within calorie limits if they consume more than 10 percent of their total daily calories from added sugars.

Added sugars are sugars and syrups added to foods in processing or preparation. They provide calories without any nutrients. Examples of common added sugars include brown sugar, corn sweetener, corn syrup, dextrose, fructose, fruit juice concentrates, glucose, high-fructose corn syrup, honey, invert sugar, lactose, malt syrup, maltose, molasses, raw sugar, sucrose, sugar, and syrup.

The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* indicates that Americans consume an average of almost 270 calories per day (more than 13 percent of daily calories) from added sugars. Intakes of added sugars as a percentage of calories are particularly high among children, adolescents, and young adults. Limiting foods with added sugars helps school menus stay under the required weekly calorie limit for each grade group.

Effective with school year 2027-28 (beginning July 1, 2027), the USDA final rule, [Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#), establishes a new dietary specification for added sugars (less than 10 percent of calories).

Sources of Added Sugars

Manufacturers often add sugars to foods in processing or preparation, most commonly as white table sugar (sucrose) and corn sweeteners. Sweetened beverages (such as soft drinks, fruit drinks, and flavored waters) account for almost half of all added sugars in the United States. The other major source is snacks and sweets, including:

- grain-based desserts such as cakes, pies, cookies, brownies, doughnuts, sweet rolls, and pastries;
- dairy desserts such as ice cream, other frozen desserts, and puddings;
- candies;
- sugars;
- jams;
- syrups; and
- sweet toppings.

Menu planners should limit these sources of added sugars in school menus and read labels to identify other processed foods that are high in added sugars.



Strategies for Reducing Added Sugars

The following guidance assists SFAs with reducing added sugars through menu planning, purchasing, meal preparation, and modifying recipes. These strategies will help menu planners reduce calories in school meals.

The foods and ingredients listed below may or may not credit in reimbursable school meals. For more information, refer to the USDA's [Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#) and the CSDE's [Crediting Guide for the School Nutrition Programs](#), and visit the CSDE's [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

Menu planning

- Review commercial products and standardized recipes to determine the amount of added sugars per serving (refer to "[How to Read a Food Label](#)" in section 6). Choose foods that are lowest in added sugars.
- Increase the frequency of fresh vegetables fruits and 100 percent whole-grain foods, instead of processed high-sugar foods.
- Serve whole fruits or unsweetened cooked fruit (such as baked apples with raisins) instead of desserts. Add spices like cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, and allspice to enhance the flavor of cooked fruit.
- Eliminate or limit grain-based desserts like cakes, cobblers, cookies, doughnuts, sweet rolls, toaster pastries, and coffee cake. **Crediting note:** Certain grain-based desserts do not credit in the SBP. Grain-based desserts cannot credit for more than 2 oz eq per week in the NSLP (refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Grain-based Desserts in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12](#)).
- If serving baked goods, choose foods that are lowest in added sugars and that contain more nutritious ingredients like whole-wheat flour, oatmeal, chopped nuts, peanut butter, and fruits and vegetables, e.g., pumpkin, zucchini, cranberries, raisins, and carrots. **Crediting note:** Certain grain-based desserts do not credit in the SBP. Grain-based desserts cannot credit for more than 2 oz eq per week in the NSLP (refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Grain-based Desserts in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12](#)).

- Eliminate or limit servings of high-sugar noncreditable foods such as gelatin, jams, jellies, syrups, and sweet toppings. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Noncreditable Foods in the Meal Patterns for the School Nutrition Programs](#).

Purchasing

- Purchase foods that are low in added sugars. Request that vendors provide nutrition information for all products. Review the Nutrition Facts label to determine the amount of added sugars in commercial products (refer to "[How to Read a Food Label](#)" in section 6). Compare brands before purchasing to determine if a comparable product is lower in added sugars.
- Write food specifications to include food items without added sugars. Some examples include canned fruits packed in 100 percent juice or water instead of syrup, frozen fruits without added sugar, dried fruits without added sugars, and whole-grain breakfast cereals that are unsweetened or low in added sugars.
- Verify that the products received are the same as the products ordered. Develop and implement a standard operating procedure (SOP) to ensure that food service personnel check products when they are received. For examples of SOPs, visit the Institute of Child Nutrition's [Standard Operating Procedures](#) webpage.
- Compare nutrition information for condiments such as salad dressings and barbecue sauce. Some condiments are high in added sugars. Choose products with the lowest amount of added sugars.
- Purchase vanilla or lemon yogurt as an alternative to fruit flavors that are higher in added sugars, or mix half plain yogurt and half fruited yogurt.
- Eliminate or limit purchases of foods that are high in added sugars, such as certain snack foods and commercial convenience foods.

Meal preparation

- Do not add additional sugars or sweeteners to standardized recipes.
- Compare standardized recipes and use those that are lowest in sugars and sweeteners.

Modifying recipes

The USDA requires that SFAs develop and follow standardized recipes for all foods prepared from scratch. For more information, refer to the Institute of Child Nutrition's [USDA Recipe Standardization Guide for School Nutrition Programs](#) and visit the "[Standardized Recipes](#)" section of the CSDE's Crediting Documentation for the Child Nutrition Programs webpage.

- Use cinnamon and vanilla to increase the sweet flavor of a food, while reducing the sugar content.
- Sprinkle cake with powdered sugar or top with fruit instead of frosting or icing. **Crediting note:** Cake does not credit in the SBP. Grain-based desserts cannot credit for more than 2 oz eq per week in the NSLP (refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Grain-based Desserts in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12](#)).
- Replace canned pie fillings with unsweetened, spiced cooked fruit when making cobblers or pies. **Crediting note:** Certain grain-based desserts do not credit in the SBP. Grain-based desserts cannot credit for more than 2 oz eq per week in the NSLP (refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Grain-based Desserts in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12](#)).
- Reduce the amount of sugar in baked goods. Sugar can usually be reduced by one-third to one-half without altering the flavor. Adding spices, dried fruits, vanilla, lemon zest, and other similar ingredients can make up for missing sugar. **Crediting note:** Certain grain-based desserts do not credit in the SBP. Grain-based desserts cannot credit for more than 2 oz eq per week in the NSLP (refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Grain-based Desserts in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12](#)).

Resources for Reducing Added Sugars

The resources below provide information on reducing added sugars in school meals.

- [Choosing Breakfast Cereals That Are Lower in Added Sugars for School Meals](#) (USDA webinar):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkmlwmJiVYY>
- [Choosing Flavored Milk That Is Lower in Added Sugars for School Meals](#) (USDA webinar):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lCvARHgtC-g>
- [Choosing Yogurt That Is Lower in Added Sugars for School Meals](#) (USDA webinar):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjV7XBRRReFU>
- [Defining Added Sugars and How to Find Them on a Nutrition Facts Label](#) (USDA webinar):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2EgjEu4-tk>
- [Identifying Sources of Added Sugars and Simple Swaps](#) (USDA webinar):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uob-DBBKIGk>
- [Reducing Added Sugars at School Breakfast: Menu Planning Tips](#) (USDA webinar):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVEnHQSGicI>
- [Reducing Added Sugars in Recipes](#) (USDA webinar):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T25NQwTzZlo>
- [Using Nutrient Analysis Software for Added Sugars](#) (USDA webinar):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQPeJQvkUBA>

For additional resources, visit the “[Dietary Specifications](#)” section of the CSDE’s Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

4 — Saturated Fat

The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommends limiting saturated fat to less than 10 percent of daily calories. Replacing saturated fat with unsaturated fat, especially polyunsaturated fat, is associated with reduced total cholesterol and low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, and a reduced risk of cardiovascular events (heart attacks) and related deaths.

USDA Dietary Specification for Saturated Fat

The USDA's dietary specifications require that school meals contain less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat, based on the weekly average of the lunch or breakfast menu.

Menu planners can help school meals meet the dietary specifications by switching from saturated fat (e.g., butter, stick margarine, and shortening) to healthier monounsaturated or polyunsaturated oils (e.g., canola, corn, olive, safflower, sesame, soybean, and sunflower).

Saturated fat exemption for fluid milk

Effective January 14, 2026, the [Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025](#) amends the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act to revise the requirements for milk in the NSLP. This law modifies the dietary specifications for the NSLP only to exclude fluid milk from the weekly limit for saturated fat at lunch. This exemption applies to all allowable types of fluid milk (refer to ["Allowable Types of Milk"](#) section of the CSDE's Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage).

Schools may exclude the saturated fat from fluid milk when calculating the weekly average saturated fat requirement for lunch. All other dietary specifications still apply to the entire reimbursable meal, including calories, sodium, and beginning July 1, 2027, added sugars. The contribution from fluid milk must be included in these calculations. For more information, refer to [USDA Memo SP 01-2026: Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025 – Implementation Requirements for the National School Lunch Program](#).

Note: The saturated fat exemption for fluid milk does not apply to the dietary specifications for the SBP. Therefore, fluid milk must be included when calculating the weekly dietary specifications for breakfast, including calories, saturated fat, sodium, and beginning July 1, 2027, added sugars.

Types of Fat

All dietary fats contain a mix of saturated and unsaturated fat. Most animal foods are high in saturated fat, except for fish. Most plant foods are high in unsaturated fat, except for coconut oil, palm oil, and palm kernel oil.

Solid fats have a higher amount of saturated fat and are usually solid at room temperature. Oils have a higher amount of polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fat and are usually liquid at room temperature. The examples below show different types of saturated and unsaturated fats.

Saturated (solid) fats

- Beef fat (tallow, suet)
- Butter
- Chicken fat
- Coconut oil
- Cream
- Hydrogenated oils
- Milk fat
- Palm kernel oil
- Palm oil
- Pork fat (lard)
- Shortening
- Stick margarine

Unsaturated fats

- Monounsaturated*
- Canola
- Olive
- Safflower
- Polyunsaturated*
- Soybean
- Corn
- Cottonseed
- Sunflower



Sources of Saturated Fat

The major source of saturated fat in the United States includes mixed dishes, especially those containing cheese, meat, or both. Examples include burgers, sandwiches, and tacos; rice, pasta, and grain dishes; pizza; meat, poultry, and seafood dishes; and soups. Other food categories that provide saturated fat include snacks and sweets, protein foods, and dairy products.

Menu planners can have the greatest impact on reducing saturated fat in school meals through careful purchasing. This includes comparing product nutrition labels and writing specifications for foods that are lower in saturated fat.

Strategies for Limiting Saturated Fat

The guidance below provides strategies to assist SFAs with reducing saturated fat in school meals through menu planning, purchasing, meal preparation, and modifying recipes.

The foods and ingredients listed below may or may not credit in reimbursable school meals. For more information, refer to the USDA's [Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#) and the CSDE's [Crediting Guide for the School Nutrition Programs](#), and visit the CSDE's [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

Menu planning

- Determine the amount of saturated fat in commercial menu items and school recipes. Review the Nutrition Facts label for commercial products (refer to "[How to Read a Food Label](#)" in section 6). Choose foods lowest in saturated fat.
- Increase servings of cooked dry beans, peas, and lentils, fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. **Crediting note:** Beans, peas, and lentils credit as credit as either the vegetables or MMA component but cannot credit as both meal components in the same meal (refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Beans, Peas, and Lentils in the School Nutrition Programs](#)). For information on determining if a product is whole grain, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Whole Grains in the School Nutrition Programs](#).
- Plan only enough of the MMA component to meet the minimum daily and weekly requirement for each grade group. Additional servings of MMA provide more saturated fat.
- Limit use of foods that are higher in saturated fat.
- Limit the frequency of processed meats such as luncheon meats, hot dogs, and sausages. **Crediting note:** Meat products with binders and extenders credit based on the percentage of meat in the product formula, without the weight of the binders and extenders. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resources, [Crediting Deli Meats in the School Nutrition Programs](#) and [Crediting Commercial Meat/Meat Alternate Products in the School Nutrition Programs](#).
- Eliminate or limit the amount of full-fat cheese served. Replace it with low-fat or reduced-fat 100 percent natural cheese.

- Limit servings of commercially prepared battered or breaded foods that are fried in fat during processing. This includes foods that are “set in breading,” i.e., deep fried just long enough to set the breading.
- Use broth-based soups instead of cream-based soups or prepared bases. **Crediting note:** Only certain types of commercial vegetable soups credit in school meals (refer to the CSDE’s resource, [*Crediting Soups in the School Nutrition Programs*](#)).
- Eliminate or limit high-fat foods such as cookies, cake, doughnuts, and brownies. **Crediting note:** Certain grain-based desserts do not credit in the SBP. Grain-based desserts cannot credit for more than 2 oz eq per week in the NSLP (refer to the CSDE’s resource, [*Crediting Grain-based Desserts in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12*](#)).
- Offer mustard, ketchup, and low-fat mayonnaise as alternatives to high-fat spreads like as regular mayonnaise.
- Offer low-fat or fat-free salad dressings instead of regular full-fat varieties. Read Nutrition Facts labels for saturated fat content and choose products lowest in saturated fat (refer to “[How to Read a Food Label](#)” and “[Limiting Sodium](#)” in section 6).



Purchasing

- Request that vendors provide nutrition information for all products. Read Nutrition Facts labels to determine the amount of saturated fat per serving (refer to “[How to Read a Food Label](#)” in section 6). Compare brands before purchasing to determine if a comparable product is lower in saturated fat.
- Write food specifications to limit the amount of saturated fat per serving. For example, specify the percentage of saturated fat for entree items, side dishes, and snack foods.
- Verify that the products received are the same as the products ordered. Develop and implement a receiving SOP to ensure that food service personnel check products when they are received.
- Purchase ground chicken or turkey (without skin) to mix with or substitute for lean ground beef in recipes.
- Limit purchases of processed meats like hotdogs, sausages, and deli meats. If purchased, specify products that are lower in saturated fat. **Crediting note:** Meat products with binders and extenders credit based on the percentage of meat in the product formula, without the weight of the binders and extenders. For more information, refer to the CSDE’s resources, [Crediting Deli Meats in the School Nutrition Programs](#) and [Crediting Commercial Meat/Meat Alternate Products in the School Nutrition Programs](#).
- Purchase leaner meats like ground beef with no more than 15 percent fat.
- Purchase tuna packed in water instead of oil.
- Avoid products with animal fat (lard), saturated vegetable oils (coconut oil, palm oil, and palm kernel oil), hydrogenated shortening, and stick-type margarine.
- Purchase lean ham as a substitute for bacon or sausage. **Crediting note:** Bacon is high in fat and low in protein and does not credit as the MMA component. Some types of bacon such as turkey bacon might credit, based on the product’s Child Nutrition (CN) label or product formulation statement (PFS). For more information, refer to the CSDE’s resources, [Noncreditable Foods in the Meal Patterns for the School Nutrition Programs](#), [Using Child Nutrition \(CN\) Labels in the School Nutrition Programs](#), and [Using Product Formulation Statements in the School Nutrition Programs](#).
- Review the saturated fat content of all condiments that will be served with school meals (refer to “[How to Read a Food Label](#)” in section 6). Purchase low-fat mayonnaise and salad dressings.

- Purchase lower fat 100 percent whole-grain breads most often (like bagels, pita bread, corn tortillas, and English muffins) instead of higher fat grain products (like muffins, croissants, doughnuts, breakfast pastries, and sweet rolls). **Crediting note:** Certain grain-based desserts do not credit in the SBP. Grain-based desserts cannot credit for more than 2 oz eq per week in the NSLP (refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Grain-based Desserts in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12](#)).
- Instead of full-fat cheese, purchase low-fat or reduced-fat natural cheese and products made with these cheeses. For example, write specifications for pizza made with part-skim mozzarella cheese instead of regular mozzarella.
- Limit use of convenience and prepared food items that are higher in saturated fat. Compare nutrition information for processed foods like pizza and hot dogs (refer to "[How to Read a Food Label](#)" in section 6). A different brand of the product may contain less saturated fat.
- Purchase soft margarine, which is lower in saturated fat than stick margarine and butter. Compare brands and choose margarine that is highly polyunsaturated.
- For commercial baking mixes like muffins and pancakes, purchase products that require fat to be added during preparation, so that the food service operation can control the type and amount of fat added during preparation.

Meal preparation

- Prepare foods from scratch to control the type and amount of fat.
- Avoid frying foods. Bake, broil, steam, poach, braise, or stir-fry instead.
- Brown meats by broiling or cooking in nonstick pans with little or no oil.
- Instead of basting or coating foods with fat, use herbs, seasonings, broth, fruit juices, or an oil-based marinade made from an oil low in saturated fat, e.g., canola, corn, olive, safflower, sesame, soybean, and sunflower.
- Use nonstick cooking spray instead of oil or shortening for braising and sautéing.
- Roast meat, poultry, and fish on a rack so fat will drain off. Completely drain fat from precooked ground meats. Drain in a colander or use a meat baster to remove fat that has cooked out of the food.

- To thicken gravies and sauces without adding fat, mix cornstarch with a small amount of cold water to make a slurry. Slowly stir this mixture into the liquid to be thickened and bring back to a boil. Cornstarch can also be used to replace a roux (a butter-flour mixture used for thickening). Use an amount of cornstarch equal to half the amount of flour indicated.
- Reduce the amount of ground beef in chili and similar entrees by half and add more beans like kidney beans or black beans. **Crediting note:** Beans, peas, and lentils credit as credit as either the vegetables or MMA component but cannot credit as both meal components in the same meal (refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Beans, Peas, and Lentils in the School Nutrition Programs](#)).
- Cook soups, stews, sauces, broths, and boiled meat the day before the meal service. Refrigerate and remove congealed fat. Make gravies after fat has hardened and is removed from liquid.
- Replace shortening and butter in recipes with vegetable oil or soft margarine (liquid oil should be the first ingredient). Choose oils low in saturated fat such as canola, corn, olive, safflower, sesame, soybean, and sunflower.
- Reduce the amount of cheese in entree items. For example, use $\frac{1}{4}$ ounce of cheese instead of $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce of cheese. Increase the amount of lean meat or meat alternate, if needed, to provide the required daily and weekly oz eq of MMA for each grade group.
- Make casserole toppings by reducing the amount of cheese and combining with dry whole-grain breadcrumbs and herbs. Boost cheese flavor with enhancers like dry mustard and lemon juice.
- Use low-fat (1%) or fat-free milk in recipes instead of reduced-fat (2%) or whole milk.
- For sauces and dressings, use low-calorie bases such as vinegar, mustard, tomato juice, and fat-free sodium-free bouillon instead of high-calorie bases like creams, fats, oils, and mayonnaise.
- Substitute low-fat yogurt for up to half of the mayonnaise in recipes.
- Use only enough low-fat salad dressing to lightly coat salad.
- Use the leanest cuts of meat and trim away all fat. Remove all fat and skin from poultry.
- Prepare cooked vegetables without added fat, e.g., butter, margarine, or oil. Use herbs and spices to boost flavor.

- When sautéing or stir-frying, use only a small amount of vegetable oil. Choose oils that are low in saturated fat, e.g., canola, corn, olive, safflower, sesame, soybean, and sunflower.
- Use nonstick skillets and baking pans when possible.
- For baked goods or other foods, use pan liners and nonstick cooking spray instead of greasing sheet pans.
- Use nonstick cooking spray instead of oil when pan-frying or sautéing foods.
- Brush breads and rolls with egg white or fat-free or low-fat milk instead of butter before baking to improve browning.

Modifying recipes

The USDA requires that SFAs develop and follow standardized recipes for all foods prepared from scratch. For more information, refer to the Institute of Child Nutrition's [USDA Recipe Standardization Guide for School Nutrition Programs](#) and visit the "[Standardized Recipes](#)" section of the CSDE's Crediting Documentation for the Child Nutrition Programs webpage.

- Substitute ground turkey or chicken (without skin) for half of the ground beef in recipes like chili, spaghetti, lasagna, and meat loaf.
- Reduce fat in recipes by as much as half, starting with one-quarter less fat and testing the recipe.
- Substitute vegetable oil or margarine for butter. Choose margarine brands that are lowest in saturated fat.
- Replace one-quarter of the ground meat in a recipe with mashed beans, like Great Northern beans in tacos. **Crediting note:** Beans, peas, and lentils credit as credit as either the vegetables or MMA component but cannot credit as both meal components in the same meal (refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Beans, Peas, and Lentils in the School Nutrition Programs](#)).

- Substitute low-fat yogurt, applesauce, or fruit puree (e.g., applesauce, plum puree, or prune puree) for oil, shortening, margarine, or butter in recipes for baked goods. Generally, the amount of fat can be reduced by half and fruit puree can substitute for an equal amount of fat in muffin or quick bread recipes. **Crediting notes:** Pureed fruit does not credit as the fruits component when used as an ingredient in other foods, such as applesauce or pureed prunes in spice cake. Certain grain-based desserts do not credit in the SBP. Grain-based desserts cannot credit for more than 2 oz eq per week in the NSLP (refer to the CSDE's resource, [*Crediting Grain-based Desserts in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12*](#)).
- Substitute low-fat cheese such as ricotta, farmer, cottage, or part-skim mozzarella for regular cheese in recipes.
- Eliminate fat from recipes when possible. For example, instead of sautéing onions in oil for spaghetti sauce, cook the onions in the sauce.
- Substitute two egg whites for one whole egg in recipes or use an egg substitute product. **Crediting note:** Egg whites and egg substitutes do not credit in the school meal patterns. Recipes that contain egg whites and egg substitutes must be evaluated for meal pattern compliance.
- Make pizza with lean ham or Canadian bacon instead of sausage or pepperoni.
- Make low-fat recipe substitutions. Some examples include substituting low-fat or fat-free yogurt or low-fat or fat-free sour cream for sour cream, substituting cocoa powder for chocolate, substituting nonfat milk or nonfat dry milk for whole and reduced-fat milk, and substituting part-skim mozzarella cheese for regular mozzarella.

For additional resources on limiting saturated fat in school meals, refer to “[Saturated Fat](#)” in the “[Dietary Specifications](#)” section of the CSDE’s Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

Resources for Limiting Saturated Fat

For more guidance and resources, visit "[Saturated Fat](#)" "in the "Dietary Specifications" section of the CSDE's Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage.



5 — Sodium

The [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) recommends limiting sodium to meet the Chronic Disease Risk Reduction (CDRR) levels defined by the National Academies. The recommended limits for daily sodium intake are 2,300 milligrams for children ages 14 and older, and adults. The daily sodium limits for younger children are 1,200 milligrams for ages 1-3, 1,500 milligrams for ages 4-8, and 1,800 milligrams for ages 9-13.



Average daily intakes of sodium are higher than these recommended limits. Americans ages 1 year and older consume about 3,993 milligrams of sodium per day, with a range of about 2,000 to 5,000 milligrams per day.

A high-sodium diet increases the risk of high blood pressure in individuals who are sodium sensitive. Keeping blood pressure in the normal range reduces the risk of heart disease, congestive heart failure, and kidney disease.

USDA Dietary Specification for Sodium

The USDA final rule, [Transitional Standards for Milk, Whole Grains and Sodium](#), established transitional standards for the NSLP and SBP, which were effective July 1, 2022. These standards were intended to encourage the reintroduction of lower sodium foods and meals to students and provide the food industry with additional time to develop and test lower sodium products that are palatable to students.

Effective July 1, 2024, the USDA final rule, [Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#), maintains the current sodium limits for breakfast and lunch through school year 2026-27 (June 30, 2027) and codifies a single sodium reduction for both programs.

- **NSLP:** By school year 2027-28, SFAs must implement a reduction of about 15 percent from current sodium levels in school lunch menus.
- **SBP:** By school year 2027-28, SFAs must implement a reduction of about 10 percent from current sodium levels in school breakfast menus.

Meals offered on average over the week must meet the sodium limit for each grade group. The sodium limits do not apply per day, per meal, or per menu item. This allows menu planners to occasionally offer higher sodium meals or menu items if they are balanced with lower sodium meals and menu items throughout the week.

The tables below summarize the current sodium limits for each grade at breakfast and lunch through June 30, 2027, and the sodium limits that take effect by July 1, 2027. Sodium levels are listed in milligrams (mg).

The optional lunch meal pattern for grades K-8 and the optional breakfast meal patterns for grades K-8, 6-12, and K-12 are allowed because the required meal pattern servings and dietary specifications for these grade groups overlap. However, these meal pattern options require a narrower calorie range (refer to [table 2-1](#)) and more restrictive sodium limit than the regular meal patterns because the weekly amounts cannot exceed the highest level for each grade group or go below the lowest level for each grade group.

Table 5-1. Sodium limits for breakfast

Grades	Current sodium limit (Target 1) through June 30, 2027	Sodium limit by July 1, 2027
K-5	≤ 540 mg	≤ 485mg
6-8	≤ 600 mg	≤ 535mg
9-12	≤ 640 mg	≤ 570 mg
K-8 option	≤ 540 mg	≤ 485mg
6-12 option	≤ 600 mg	≤ 570 mg
K-12 option	≤ 540 mg	≤ 485mg

Table 5-2. Sodium limits for lunch

Grades	Current sodium limit (Target 1A) through June 30, 2027	Sodium limit by July 1, 2027
K-5	≤ 1,110 mg	≤ 935 mg
6-8	≤ 1,225 mg	≤ 1,035 mg
9-12	≤ 1280 mg	≤ 1,080 mg
K-8 option	≤ 1,110 mg	≤ 935 mg

Sources of Sodium

Sodium is found in almost all food categories. According to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, the top source of sodium in the American diet is mixed dishes like sandwiches, burgers, hotdogs, breakfast sandwiches, burritos, and tacos. These foods account for 21 percent of the average daily sodium intake. Other significant sources include:

- rice, pasta, and other grain-based dishes;
- vegetables, including starchy vegetables;
- pizza;
- meat, poultry, and seafood mixed dishes;
- soups;
- chips, crackers, and savory snacks;
- desserts and sweet snacks;
- yeast breads and tortillas;
- deli meats and cured products;
- breakfast cereals and cereal bars;
- eggs; and
- accompaniments like condiments, gravies, spreads, and salad dressings.

Many foods in these categories are often commercially processed or prepared. Food manufacturers use sodium extensively in processed foods as a flavor and color enhancer, binder, preservative, and stabilizer.

Most of the sodium in foods comes from salt added during commercial food processing and preparation.



Strategies for Limiting Sodium

Menu planners can have the greatest impact on reducing sodium in school meals through careful purchasing and meal preparation.

- **Purchasing:** Sodium content varies even among very similar products, due to the way foods are processed and prepared. Menu planners can significantly reduce high-sodium foods in school meals by comparing product nutrition labels (refer to “[How to Read a Food Label](#)” in section 6) and writing purchasing specifications for foods that are lower in sodium. Foods containing 20 percent or more of the Daily Value for sodium are high in sodium and should be limited in school menus.
- **Meal preparation:** Many commercial products are high in sodium. Preparing more foods from scratch allows SFAs to control the amount of sodium added to foods and reduce sodium levels in school meals.

The guidance below provides strategies to assist SFAs with reducing sodium through menu planning, purchasing, meal preparation, and modifying recipes. For additional guidance on reducing sodium, visit the ICN’s [Sodium Resources for School Nutrition Professionals](#) website.

The foods and ingredients listed below may or may not credit in reimbursable school meals. For more information, refer to the USDA’s [Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#) and the CSDE’s [Crediting Guide for the School Nutrition Programs](#), and visit the CSDE’s [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

Menu planning

- Review commercial products (refer to “[How to Read a Food Label](#)” in section 6) and standardized recipes to determine the amount of sodium per serving. Choose foods and recipes that are lowest in sodium.
- When the menu includes entrees that are higher in sodium, plan low-sodium foods to accompany them. For example, serve fresh fruits and vegetables with a breaded chicken patty.
- Serve smaller portions of high-sodium foods.

- Eliminate or limit high-sodium foods such as bacon, pickles, olives, and sauerkraut. **Crediting note:** **Crediting note:** Bacon is high in fat and low in protein and does not credit as the MMA component. Some types of bacon such as turkey bacon might credit, based on the product's Child Nutrition (CN) label or product formulation statement (PFS). For more information, refer to the CSDE's resources, [Noncreditable Foods in the Meal Patterns for the School Nutrition Programs](#), [Using Child Nutrition \(CN\) Labels in the School Nutrition Programs](#), and [Using Product Formulation Statements in the School Nutrition Programs](#).
- Eliminate processed meats such as luncheon meats, hot dogs, and sausages, or limit to no more than one serving per week. **Crediting note:** Meat products with binders and extenders credit based on the percentage of meat in the product formula, without the weight of the binders and extenders. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resources, [Crediting Deli Meats in the School Nutrition Programs](#) and [Crediting Commercial Meat/Meat Alternate Products in the School Nutrition Programs](#).
- Use low-fat or reduced-fat low-sodium natural cheeses (e.g., brick, cheddar, Colby, Monterey Jack, mozzarella, Muenster, provolone, and Swiss) instead of processed cheeses like pasteurized process cheese food, pasteurized process cheese spread, and pasteurized process cheese product.
- Plan more menu items that are made from scratch to control the amount of added salt and other ingredients that contain sodium.
- Plan unprocessed whole foods more frequently, e.g., fresh vegetables (especially dark green, red/orange, and beans, peas, and lentils), fruits, grains, low-fat dairy, and lean meats.
- Remove table salt and high-sodium condiments from the serving and dining areas.
- Limit ingredients that contain sodium, e.g., baking powder, baking soda, sodium nitrite, monosodium glutamate (MSG), and soy sauce. For guidance on identifying ingredients that contain sodium, refer to the American Heart Association's resource on [sodium sources](#).
- Use fresh vegetables instead of canned whenever possible.

Purchasing

- Reduce purchases of commercially prepared convenience foods and prepare more foods from scratch.

Convenience foods are the greatest source of sodium in school meals.

- Request that vendors provide nutrition information for all products. Read Nutrition Facts labels and ingredients to determine the sodium content per serving (refer to “[How to Read a Food Label](#)” in section 6). Compare brands before purchasing to determine if a comparable product is lower in sodium.
- Write food specifications for food products with no or low sodium.
- Verify that the products received are the same as the products ordered. Develop and implement a receiving SOP to ensure that food service personnel check products when they are received.
- Purchase lower sodium varieties of foods such as tomato products, canned vegetables, and soups. **Crediting note:** Only certain types of commercial vegetable soups credit in school meals (refer to the CSDE’s resource, [Crediting Soups in the School Nutrition Programs](#)).
- Purchase fresh and frozen vegetables most often. When purchasing canned vegetables, specify low or no sodium.
- Purchase spices and herbs to use instead of salt and seasonings that contain salt.
- Purchase seasoning powders instead of seasoning salts, like garlic or onion powder instead of garlic or onion salt.
- Purchase unsalted or reduced-salt crackers instead of regular crackers.
- Purchase old-fashioned cooked cereals like rolled oats instead of instant cooked cereals that are high in salt.

Meal preparation

- If canned vegetables contain added salt, rinse under cold running water for two to three minutes before heating.
- Do not add salt to boiling water when cooking pasta, vegetables, or cereal grains.
- Do not add additional salt to recipes. Eliminate or reduce the amount of added salt when possible.
- Use fresh or frozen vegetables instead of canned vegetables.
- Make grain foods like biscuits and pancakes from scratch instead of using prepared mixes.
- Avoid standardized recipes that contain substantial amounts of baking soda or baking powder.
- Use spices and herb blends creatively in place of salt. For more information, refer to the “[Using Spices and Seasonings](#)” section of the CSDE’s Menu Planning for Child Nutrition Programs webpage.
- Use seasoning powders instead of seasoning salts, like garlic or onion powder instead of garlic or onion salt.

Modifying recipes

The USDA requires that SFAs develop and follow standardized recipes for all foods prepared from scratch. For more information, refer to the Institute of Child Nutrition’s [USDA Recipe Standardization Guide for School Nutrition Programs](#) and visit the “[Standardized Recipes](#)” section of the CSDE’s Crediting Documentation for the Child Nutrition Programs webpage.

- Review standardized recipes and reduce or eliminate the amount of high-sodium ingredients or added salt when possible.
- Increase the use of recipes that are lower in sodium.

For additional resources on limiting sodium in school meals, refer to “[Sodium](#)” in the “[Dietary Specifications](#)” section of the CSDE’s Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

Resources for Limiting Sodium

The resources below provide information on limiting sodium in school meals.

- [Get the Facts: Sources of Sodium in Your Diet](#) (CDC):
<https://www.cdc.gov/salt/pdfs/Sources-of-Sodium.pdf>
- [Lowering Sodium in School Foods](#) (American Heart Association):
https://www.heart.org/idc/groups/heart-public/@wcm/@adv/documents/downloadable/ucm_472940.pdf
- [Reducing Sodium in the Diets of American Children](#) (AHA):
http://www.heart.org/idc/groups/heart-public/@wcm/@adv/documents/downloadable/ucm_433027.pdf
- [Sodium and Children](#) (CDC):
https://www.cdc.gov/salt/sodium_and_children.htm
- [Sodium Limits for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for School Meals for Grades K-12](#) (CSDE):
https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/nslp/mealpattern/sodium_limits_nslp_sbp.pdf

For additional resources, visit the “[Dietary Specifications](#)” section of the CSDE’s Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

6 — Using Food Labels

The FDA requires the Nutrition Facts label on most packaged foods and beverages. The Nutrition Facts label can vary among different products because it contains product-specific information for serving size, calories, and nutrient information.

The FDA requires food manufacturers to list all ingredients in the food on the label. The ingredients statement lists ingredients by weight, from most to least. The closer an ingredient is to the beginning of the list, the more of it the food contains.

Using Food Labels for School Meals

Food labels provide a variety of useful information for school nutrition programs. The examples below show some of the ways that the Nutrition Facts label and ingredients statement can help menu planners with meeting the NSLP and SBP meal pattern requirements.

- **Meeting the dietary specifications:** Food labels help menu planners choose foods and plan menus to meet the weekly calorie ranges and limits for saturated fat and sodium.
- **Comparing products:** Menu planners can use food labels and ingredients statements to compare products and purchase healthier options, such as choosing products that are lower in saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars. Look for products that contain whole foods (such as meats, beans, peas, and lentils, fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy) as the first three ingredients, and that have a short ingredients list. Foods with a long ingredients list tend to be highly processed and less nutrient-dense.
- **Balancing menus:** Menu planners can use food labels to balance the nutrients in school menus. For example, if a lunch menu includes a food item that is high in fat, added sugars, or sodium, food labels can help the menu planner choose other foods that are low in these same nutrients to balance the overall weekly menu.



- **Determining if a PFS is required:** The ingredients statement can help menu planners determine if a PFS is required. For example, a PFS is required for grain products that contain noncreditable grains; meat products with liquids, binders, and extenders; and tempeh products that contain other ingredients beside soybeans (or other legumes), water, tempeh culture, and for some varieties, vinegar, seasonings, and herbs. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Using Product Formulation Statements in the School Nutrition Programs](#).

Commercial processed products that are not listed in the USDA's [Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#) require a CN label or PFS to document compliance with the NSLP and SBP meal patterns. The USDA requires that SFAs must verify PFS forms for accuracy prior to purchasing, serving, and claiming the food product in reimbursable meals and afterschool snacks. For more information, refer to the CSDE's [Guide to Menu Documentation for the School Nutrition Programs](#) and visit the CSDE's [Crediting Documentation for the Child Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

- **Meeting the WGR criteria:** The ingredients statement on the product label provides the information required to determine if a grain product meets the WGR criteria for the school nutrition programs. For more information, refer to the CSDE's [Guide to Meeting the Whole Grain-rich Requirement for the Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the School Nutrition Programs](#).
- **Meeting the crediting criteria for tofu:** To credit as 1 oz eq of the MMA component, commercial tofu products and tofu and other soy products must contain at least 5 grams of protein in 2.2 ounces (weight) or 1/4 cup (volume). The Nutrition Facts label provides the information required to determine whether a tofu product meets this requirement. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Tofu and Tofu Products in the School Nutrition Programs](#).
- **Making nutrition information available:** Food labels help menu planners meet the USDA's requirement to make nutrition information for school meals available as needed to students, families, school nurses and other medical professionals, and appropriate school staff. The USDA considers providing nutrition information for foods served in school meals and afterschool snacks to be a component of reasonable meal modifications for students with a disability that restricts their diet. Examples include providing nutrition information on school menus, providing nutrition information on the school food service website, and maintaining a binder of nutrition labels in the school cafeteria or district food service office that parents or guardians can review. This enables

parents or guardians and appropriate medical personnel to determine which meals and afterschool snacks are safe for the child to eat, and which meals the SFA must modify to meet the child's specific dietary requirements. For more information, refer to the CSDE's [Guide to Meal Modifications in School Nutrition Programs](#) and visit the CSDE's [Special Diets in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

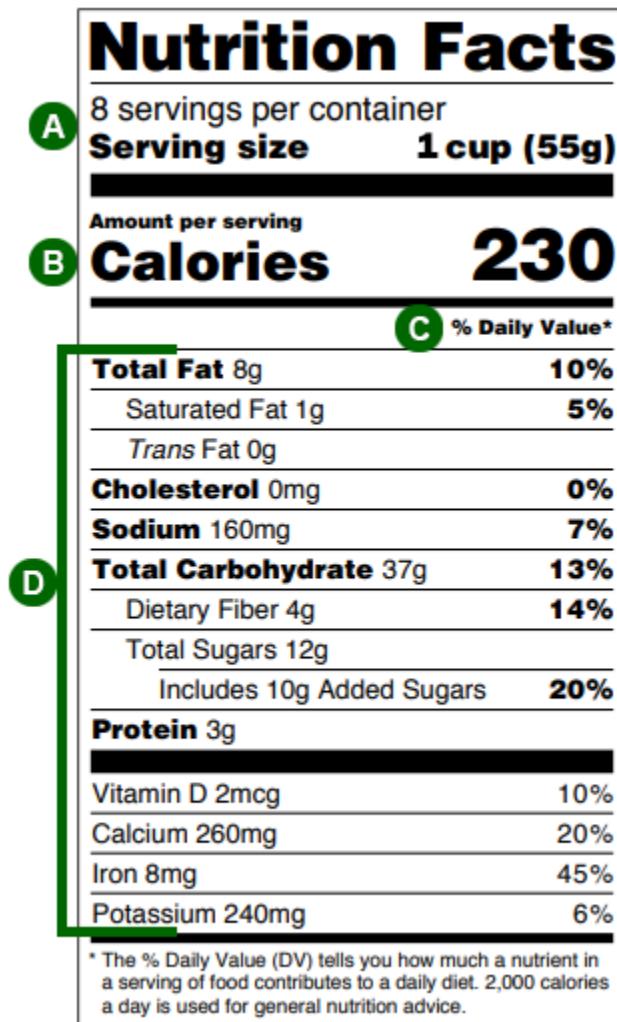
- **Making appropriate and safe meal modifications:** The ingredients statement on the product label provides the required information for SFAs to make appropriate and safe meal modifications for students with special dietary needs like food allergies or celiac disease. For more information, refer to the CSDE's [Guide to Meal Modifications in School Nutrition Programs](#) and visit the CSDE's [Special Diets in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.
- **Meeting the Administrative Review requirements:** SFAs must obtain nutrition information for all commercial processed foods used to prepare school meals. If a processed product does not have a Nutrition Facts panel, the SFA is responsible for obtaining the necessary information from the manufacturer. This information must be readily available for use by the CSDE in conducting the nutrient analysis of school breakfast and lunch menus, as part of the CSDE's Administrative Review of the school nutrition programs.

SFAs must ensure that menu planners obtain Nutrition Facts labels and ingredients for commercial products as needed to meet these requirements.



How to Read a Food Label

The Nutrition Facts label contains product-specific information for serving size, calories, and nutrients (refer to A-D below). The bottom section contains a footnote that explains the “% Daily Value.” The guidance in this section shows how to read a food label. The letters refer to the green circles in the applicable sections of the sample Nutrition Facts label below.



Serving information (A)

The serving information on the Nutrition Facts label includes the serving size and number of servings per container. Serving sizes are standardized and reflect the amount that people typically consume. Individual packages that contain between one and two servings, such as a 15-ounce can of soup, must be labeled as one serving because people typically consume the entire package.

The serving size on the Nutrition Facts label may be different from the serving required to meet the NSLP and SBP meal patterns. SFAs must ensure that commercial products provide the amount of each meal component being credited. For information on the required meal component servings, refer to the CSDE's [Guide to the Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program](#) and visit the CSDE's [Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage. For guidance on crediting foods, refer to the CSDE's [Crediting Guide for the School Nutrition Programs](#) and visit the CSDE's [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

Calories (B)

The nutrition information for calories is based on the stated serving (A). The actual amount of calories could be more or less, depending on the serving provided. For example, one serving (1 cup) of this product contains 230 calories. If the lunch menu includes 1½ cups, students will receive 345 calories.

Percent Daily Value (% DV) (C)

The "% Daily Value" on the Nutrition Facts label indicates how much each nutrient in the serving contributes to a daily diet of 2,000 calories. Daily values are reference amounts of nutrients to consume or not to exceed. They are used to calculate the % DV that manufacturers include on the label. For example, a serving (1 cup) of this product contains 10 percent of the recommended daily limit for fat, 7 percent of the recommended daily limit for sodium, and 20 percent of the recommended daily limit for added sugars.

The % DV statement is listed underneath the nutrients section, at the bottom of the Nutrition Facts panel. It states the following: "The % Daily Value tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice."

Nutrients (D)

The Nutrition Facts labels lists key nutrients to decrease or increase for better health. The amounts of these nutrients are listed in grams (g), milligrams (mg), or micrograms (mcg).

- **Nutrients to decrease:** Saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars are nutrients to decrease due to their adverse health effects. Eating too much saturated fat and sodium is associated with an increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease and high blood pressure. Consuming too much added sugars (more than 10 percent of total daily calories) can make it hard to meet important nutrient needs while staying within calorie limits.
- **“Total Carbohydrates”** includes dietary fiber, total sugars, and starches, but the Nutrition Facts panel lists only dietary fiber and total sugars. To determine the amount of starches per serving, add the grams of dietary fiber and total sugars, then subtract this amount from “Total Carbohydrates.” For example, this sample Nutrition Facts label indicates that a serving of this product contains 37 grams of carbohydrates, 4 grams of dietary fiber, and 12 grams of total sugars. Subtracting the dietary fiber and total sugars (16 grams) from the total carbohydrates (37 grams) equals 21 grams of starches.
- **“Total Sugars”** includes naturally occurring sugars, and sugars added during processing. If a food contains added sugars, the grams (g) will be listed below “Total Sugars,” (for example, “includes 4g Added Sugars”) and will also be listed as a %DV (C).
- **Nutrients to increase:** Dietary fiber, vitamin D, calcium, iron, and potassium have a positive impact on health, and are nutrients to increase. Eating a diet high in dietary fiber supports digestive health, can lower blood glucose and cholesterol levels, and reduce calorie intake. Diets higher in vitamin D, calcium, iron, and potassium can reduce the risk of developing osteoporosis, anemia, and high blood pressure. Many Americans do not get enough of these nutrients.

In addition to the required nutrients, manufacturers may choose to include other vitamins and minerals on the Nutrition Facts label.

Label Rounding

The FDA regulations include specific requirements for rounding the numbers on the Nutrition Facts label. For example, if a food contains less than 5 milligrams of sodium, the label may indicate “0 milligrams” of sodium. As a result, the numbers might not add up exactly or the percentage might be slightly different if the menu planner calculates this information manually. For more information, refer to “Appendix H: Rounding the Values According to FDA Rounding Rules” in the FDA’s [Guidance for Industry: Food Labeling Guide](#).

Nutrition Claims

Some manufacturers choose to include nutrient content claims or health claims on their products. These descriptions are optional but must be approved by the FDA and comply with the FDA’s regulations.

Nutrient content claims

The Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990 (NLEA) permits the use of nutrient content claims that are authorized by the FDA and made in accordance with FDA's authorizing regulations. Nutrient content claims describe the level of a nutrient in the product (such as “low fat” or “high in fiber”) or they compare the level of a nutrient in a food to that of another food, using terms such as “more,” “reduced,” and “lite.” These terms are defined by FDA regulations and mean the same thing for all foods, regardless of manufacturer.

Definitions for common nutrient content claims are available in “Appendix A: Definitions of Nutrient Content Claims” and “Appendix B: Additional Requirements for Nutrient Content Claims” of the FDA’s [Guidance for Industry: Food Labeling Guide](#). For additional guidance, visit the FDA’s [Label Claims for Conventional Foods and Dietary Supplements](#) webpage.

Health claims

Health claims describe a relationship between a food substance (a food, meal component, or dietary ingredient), and reduced risk of a disease or health-related condition. The FDA allows manufacturers to make certain health claims that are supported by scientific evidence and authorized by FDA regulations, for example, “*adequate calcium throughout life may reduce the risk of osteoporosis.*”

Health claims can be used only under certain conditions, such as when the food is an adequate source of the appropriate nutrients. A reference to the claim usually appears on the front label, but the claim itself may appear elsewhere on the label.

For more information, refer to “Appendix C: Health Claims” in the FDA’s [Guidance for Industry: Food Labeling Guide](#) and visit the FDA’s [Label Claims for Conventional Foods and Dietary Supplements](#) and [Authorized Health Claims That Meet the Significant Scientific Agreement \(SSA\) Standard](#) webpages.

SFAs may use the FDA’s whole grain health claim to determine whether a product meets the USDA’s WGR requirement for the NSLP and SBP meal patterns for grades K-12. For more information, refer to the CSDE’s [Guide to Meeting the Whole Grain-rich Requirement for the Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the School Nutrition Programs](#).



Resources for Food Labels

The resources below provide information on food labels.

- [Changes to the Nutrition Facts Label](https://www.fda.gov/food/food-labeling-nutrition/changes-nutrition-facts-label?source=govdelivery&utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery) (FDA webpage):
https://www.fda.gov/food/food-labeling-nutrition/changes-nutrition-facts-label?source=govdelivery&utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery
- [Final Rule: Food Labeling: Revision of the Nutrition and Supplement Facts Labels \(81 FR 33741\)](https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=FDA-2012-N-1210-0875):
<https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=FDA-2012-N-1210-0875>
- [Final Rule Food Labeling: Serving Sizes of Foods that Can Reasonably Be Consumed at One Eating Occasion; Dual-Column Labeling; Updating, Modifying, and Establishing Certain Reference Amounts Customarily Consumed; Serving Size for Breath Mints; and Technical Amendments \(\(81 FR 34000\)\)](https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=FDA-2004-N-0258-0136): <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=FDA-2004-N-0258-0136>
- [Food Facts: New and Improved Nutrition Facts Label](https://www.fda.gov/downloads/food/labelingnutrition/ucm537178.pdf) (FDA):
<https://www.fda.gov/downloads/food/labelingnutrition/ucm537178.pdf>
- [Food Labels](https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/nutrition-education/food-labels) (CSDE's Nutrition Education webpage):
<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/nutrition-education/food-labels>
- [Guidance for Industry: Food Labeling Guide](https://www.fda.gov/regulatory-information/search-fda-guidance-documents/guidance-industry-food-labeling-guide) (FDA):
<https://www.fda.gov/regulatory-information/search-fda-guidance-documents/guidance-industry-food-labeling-guide>
- [Health Educator's Nutrition Toolkit: Setting the Table for Healthy Eating](https://www.fda.gov/food/nutrition-education-resources-materials/health-educators-nutrition-toolkit-setting-table-healthy-eating) (FDA):
<https://www.fda.gov/food/nutrition-education-resources-materials/health-educators-nutrition-toolkit-setting-table-healthy-eating>
- [The New and Improved Nutrition Facts Label – Key Changes](https://www.fda.gov/downloads/Food/LabelingNutrition/UCM511646.pdf) (FDA):
<https://www.fda.gov/downloads/Food/LabelingNutrition/UCM511646.pdf>

For additional resources, visit the “[Food Labels](#)” section of the CSDE’s Nutrition Education webpage.



7 — Resources

This section includes additional resources and websites to assist SFAs with meeting the NSLP and SBP meal patterns and the crediting, documentation, and meal service requirements for the school nutrition programs. More links to information on the federal and state requirements and guidance for school meals are available on the CSDE's [Program Guidance for School Nutrition Programs](#) webpages. For a list of resources on the meal patterns and crediting requirements, refer to the CSDE's [Meal Pattern and Crediting Resources for the School Nutrition Programs](#).

Meal Components and Crediting

[Crediting Documentation for the Child Nutrition Programs](#) (CSDE webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/crediting-documentation-for-the-child-nutrition-programs>

[Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) (CSDE webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/crediting-foods-in-school-nutrition-programs>

[Crediting Summary Charts for the Meal Patterns for the School Nutrition Programs](#)

(CSDE):

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/nslp/crediting/crediting_summary_charts_snp.pdf

[Guide to Meeting the Whole Grain-rich Requirement for the Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the School Nutrition Programs](#) (CSDE):

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/nslp/crediting/guide_wgr_requirement_snp_grades_k-12.pdf

[Meal Pattern and Crediting Resources for the School Nutrition Programs](#) (CSDE):

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/nslp/crediting/resources_school_meal_patterns_snp.pdf

[Menu Planning Guidance for School Meals for Grades K-12](#) (CSDE webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/menu-planning-guidance-for-school-meals>

[Noncreditable Foods in the Meal Patterns for the School Nutrition Programs](#) (CSDE):

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/nslp/crediting/noncreditable_foods_snp.pdf

[What's in a Meal: Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the School Nutrition Programs](#) (CSDE's

Meal Pattern Training for School Nutrition Programs webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/meal-pattern-training-materials>

Meal Patterns and Menu Planning

[Breakfast Meal Patterns for Grades K-12](#) (CSDE's Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/meal-patterns-school-nutrition-programs/breakfast-meal-patterns>

[Dietary Specifications](#) (CSDE's Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Program webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/meal-patterns-school-nutrition-programs/dietary-specifications>

[Lunch Meal Patterns for Grades K-12](#) (CSDE's Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/meal-patterns-school-nutrition-programs/lunch-meal-patterns>

[Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs](#) (CSDE webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/meal-patterns-school-nutrition-programs>

[Menu Planner for School Meals](#) (USDA):

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/menu-planner>

[Menu Planning Checklists for Lunch for Grades K-12](#) (CSDE's Forms for School Nutrition Programs webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/forms-for-school-nutrition-programs#MenuPlanningChecklistsLunchGradesK-12>

[Menu Planning for Child Nutrition Programs](#) (CSDE webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/menu-planning>

[Nutrition Standards for School Meals](#) (USDA webpage):

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/nutrition-standards-school-meals>

[Offer versus Serve for School Nutrition Programs](#) (CSDE webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/offer-versus-serve-for-school-nutrition-programs>

[Offer versus Serve Guide for School Meals](#) (CSDE):

https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition//~/media/sde/nutrition/nslp/ovs/ovs_guide_snp.pdf

[Overview of Menu Planning for Grades K-12 in the National School Lunch Program](#) (CSDE):

https://portal.ct.gov//media/sde/nutrition/nslp/mealpattern/overview_menu_planning_nslp_grades_k-12.pdf

Overview of Menu Planning for Grades K-12 in the School Breakfast Program (CSDE):

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/sbp/overview_menu_planning_sbp_grades_k-12.pdf

Sodium Limits for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for School Meals for Grades K-12 (CSDE):

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/nslp/mealpattern/sodium_limits_nslp_sbp.pdf

Upcoming Meal Pattern Changes (CSDE's Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage):

https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/meal-patterns-school-nutrition-programs#Upcoming_Meal_Pattern_Changes

What's in a Meal: Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the School Nutrition Programs (CSDE's

Meal Pattern Training for School Nutrition Programs webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/meal-pattern-training-materials>

Policy and Guidance

C.G.S. Section 10-221q. Sale of beverages:

https://www.cga.ct.gov/current/pub/chap_170.htm#sec_10-221q

Child Nutrition Programs Legislation and Regulations (USDA):

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/legislation-regulations>

Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) for the National School Lunch Program (7 CFR 210)

(USDA):

<https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7 subtitle-B/ chapter-II/ subchapter-A/ part-210>

Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) for the School Breakfast Program (7 CFR 220) (USDA):

<https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7 subtitle-B/ chapter-II/ subchapter-A/ part-220>

Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Documents & Resources (USDA):

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/resources>

Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Instructions (CSDE):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/fns-instructions-for-child-nutrition-programs>

Laws and Regulations for Child Nutrition Programs (CSDE webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/laws-and-regulations-for-child-nutrition-programs>

Manuals and Guides for Child Nutrition Programs (CSDE):

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/manuals-and-guides-for-child-nutrition-program>

[Operational Memoranda for School Nutrition Programs \(CSDE\):](#)

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/lists/operational-memoranda-for-school-nutrition-programs>

[Program Guidance for School Nutrition Programs \(CSDE\):](#)

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/program-guidance-school-nutrition-programs>

[Questions and Answers on Connecticut Statutes for School Foods and Beverages CSDE\):](#)

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/hfc/questions_answers_connecticut_statutes_school_foods_beverages.pdf

[School Lunch Tray and Table Talk \(CSDE\):](#)

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/school-lunch-tray-and-table-talk>

[Training for Child Nutrition Programs \(CSDE\):](#)

<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/training-for-child-nutrition-programs>

[USDA Final Rule: Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs \(77 FR 4087\):](#)

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/fr-012612>

[USDA Final Rule: Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans \(89 FR 31962\):](#)

<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/04/25/2024-08098/child-nutrition-programs-meal-patterns-consistent-with-the-2020-2025-dietary-guidelines-for>

[USDA Memo SP 05-2022: Meal Requirements Under the NSLP & SBP: Q&A for Program Operators Updated to Support the Transitional Standards Effective July 1, 2022:](#)

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/sp052022-questions-answers-program-operators>

Glossary

added sugars: Sugars and syrups added to foods in processing or preparation, as opposed to the naturally occurring sugars found in nutrient-dense foods like fruits, vegetables, grains, and dairy products. Names for added sugars include brown sugar, corn sweetener, corn syrup, dextrose, fructose, fruit juice concentrates, glucose, high-fructose corn syrup, honey, invert sugar, lactose, malt syrup, maltose, molasses, raw sugar, sucrose, sugar, and syrup.

Administrative Review (AR): The state agency's comprehensive offsite and onsite evaluation of all SFAs participating in the NSLP and SBP. The review cycle is every three years for each SFA and includes a review of critical and general areas. For more information, visit the CSDE's [Administrative Review for School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

Afterschool Snack Program (ASP): The USDA's federally assisted snack program implemented through the NSLP. The ASP provides cash reimbursement to help schools serve snacks to children in afterschool activities aimed at promoting the health and well-being of children and youth. Schools must provide children with regularly scheduled activities in an organized, structured, and supervised environment that includes educational or enrichment activities, e.g., mentoring/tutoring programs. Programs must meet state or local licensing requirements and health and safety standards. For more information, visit the CSDE's [Afterschool Snack Program](#) webpage.

afterschool snacks: Reimbursable snacks offered in the Afterschool Snack Program (ASP). For refer to "Afterschool Snack Program" in this section.

age/grade groups: The three grade groupings (K-5, 6-8, and 9-12) of the USDA's meal breakfast and lunch patterns for grades K-12. The classification of grade groups is based on children's nutritional needs and the ages that typically correspond with these grade levels (ages 5-10 for grades K-5, ages 11-13 for grades 6-8, and ages 14-18 for grades 9-12).

beans, peas, and lentils (pulses): The dried edible seeds of legumes (such as beans, lentils, chickpeas, and split peas) that are one of the five vegetable subgroups recommended by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Pulses include all beans, peas, and lentils cooked from dry, canned, or frozen, such as kidney beans, pinto beans, black beans, pink beans, black-eyed peas, garbanzo beans (chickpeas), split peas, pigeon peas, mung beans, and lentils. The meal patterns for Child Nutrition Programs allow beans, peas, and lentils to credit as either the MMA component or the vegetables component. Minimum weekly servings are required in the NSLP meal patterns for grades K-12. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Beans, Peas, and Lentils in the School Nutrition Programs](#).

bran: The seed husk or outer coating of cereal grains such as wheat, rye, and oats. Examples include oat bran, wheat bran, corn bran, rice bran, and rye bran. Bran credits the same as enriched grains.

calories: The measurement of energy provided by foods. The dietary specifications for school meals require calorie ranges for each grade group at lunch and breakfast, which are based on the average calories over the week. For more information, refer to “dietary specifications” in this section.

carbohydrates: A category of nutrients that includes sugars (simple carbohydrates) and starch and fiber (complex carbohydrates). Carbohydrates are easily converted by the body to energy (calories). Foods that provide carbohydrates (fruits, vegetables, breads, cereals, grains, milk, and dairy products) are important sources of many nutrients. However, foods containing large amounts of added sugars provide calories but few, if any, nutrients. For more information, refer to “added sugars” and “simple carbohydrates” in this section.

cereal grains: The seeds that come from grasses. Cereal grains can be whole grain (such as amaranth, barley, buckwheat, corn, millet, oats, quinoa, rice, rolled wheat, rye, sorghum, triticale, wheat, and wheat berries) or enriched (such as enriched cornmeal, corn grits, and farina).

Child Nutrition (CN) label: A statement approved by the USDA that clearly identifies the contribution of a food product toward the meal pattern requirements, based on the USDA’s evaluation of the product’s formulation. Products eligible for CN labels include main dish entrees that provide at least $\frac{1}{2}$ oz eq of the MMA component, e.g., beef patties, cheese or meat pizzas, meat or cheese and bean burritos, egg rolls, and breaded fish portions. CN labels usually indicate the contribution of other meal components (such as vegetables, grains, and fruits) that are part of these products. For more information, refer to the CSDE’s resource, [Using Child Nutrition \(CN\) Labels in the School Nutrition Programs](#), and visit the “[Child Nutrition Labels](#)” section of the CSDE’s Crediting Documentation for the Child Nutrition Programs webpage.

Child Nutrition Programs: The USDA’s federally funded programs that provide nutritious meals and snacks to children, including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Afterschool Snack Program (ASP), Special Milk Program (SMP), Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), Seamless Summer Option (SSO) of the NSLP, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP), and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). The CACFP also provides nutritious meals and snacks to the frail elderly in adult day care centers. For more information, visit the CSDE’s [Child Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

creditable food: A food or beverage that counts toward meeting the meal pattern requirements for reimbursable meals and afterschool snacks in the USDA's Child Nutrition Programs. For more information, refer to the CSDE's [*Crediting Guide for the School Nutrition Programs*](#) and visit the CSDE's [*Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs*](#) webpage.

creditable grains: The ingredients in a commercial grain product or standardized recipe that credit toward the grains component. Creditable grains include whole grains, enriched grains, bran, and germ. For more information, refer the CSDE's resources, [*Crediting Whole Grains in the School Nutrition Programs*](#) and [*Crediting Enriched Grains in the School Nutrition Programs*](#).

Dietary Guidelines for Americans: A federal document that provides science-based advice for Americans ages 2 and older to promote health and reduce risk for chronic diseases through diet and physical activity. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the USDA jointly publish the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* every five years. This document forms the basis of federal food, nutrition education, and information programs. For more information, visit the [*Dietary Guidelines for Americans*](#) webpage.

Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs): A common set of reference values developed by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) that represent the most current scientific knowledge on nutrient needs of healthy populations. For more information, visit the National Academies' [*Dietary Reference Intakes*](#) webpage.

dietary specifications (apply only to the NSLP and SBP meal patterns for grades K-12): The USDA's nutrition standards for the NSLP and SBP meal patterns for grades K-12, that include weekly calorie ranges and weekly limits for saturated fat and sodium. For information on the specific dietary specifications for each grade group, visit the "[*Dietary Specifications*](#)" section of the CSDE's Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

Effective with school year 2026-27 (beginning July 1, 2027), the USDA final rule, [*Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*](#), requires a new weekly dietary specification for added sugars (less than 10 percent of calories). For more information, visit the "[*Upcoming Meal Pattern Changes*](#)" section of the CSDE's Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

entree: Refer to "main dish" in this section.

Exhibit A chart: The USDA's [Exhibit A: Grain Requirements for Child Nutrition Programs](#) chart that indicates the required weight (groups A-G) or volume (groups H-I) for different types of grain foods to provide 1 oz eq of the grains component. For guidance on applicable Exhibit A quantities and requirements for each school nutrition program, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Grain Ounce Equivalents Chart for the School Nutrition Programs](#).

flour: Finely ground and sifted wheat or other grains such as rye, corn, rice, or buckwheat.

fluid milk substitutes: Plant-based beverages like fortified soy milk that are intended to replace cow's milk. Fluid milk substitutes must meet the USDA's nutrition standards for fluid milk substitutes. Only certain brands of fluid milk substitutes meet these standards. CACFP facilities may choose to offer allowable fluid milk substitutes to children who do not consume milk due to non-disability reasons. For more information, refer to "nutrition standards for milk substitutes" in this section and the CSDE's resources, [Allowable Fluid Milk Substitutes for Non-Disability Reasons in the School Nutrition Programs](#) and [Determining if Nondairy Milk Substitutes Meet the USDA's Nutrition Standards for Fluid Milk Substitutes in School Nutrition Programs](#).

food item: A specific food offered within the required meal components for reimbursable meals in the USDA's school nutrition programs. A food item may contain one or more meal components or more than one serving of a single component. For example, an entree could provide 1 oz eq of the grains component and 1 oz eq of the MMA component. A 2-ounce whole grain or enriched bagel could provide 2 oz eq of the grains component.

fruits component: The meal component of the USDA meal patterns that includes fruits (fresh, frozen, canned, and dried) and pasteurized full-strength juice. Fruit juice cannot exceed half of the weekly fruit offerings at lunch or breakfast. For more information, visit the "[Fruits](#)" section of the CSDE's [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

germ: The vitamin-rich sprouting section of the whole-grain kernel. Germ credits the same as enriched grains.

grade groups: Refer to "age/grade groups" in this section.

grain-based desserts: Desserts made of grains, such as brownies, cookies, sweet crackers (e.g., graham crackers and animal crackers), cakes, cupcakes, coffee cakes, cinnamon streusel quick breads, piecrusts in sweet pies (e.g., apple, coconut, blueberry, and pecan), cinnamon rolls, doughnuts, cereal bars, granola bars, breakfast bars, sweet rolls, pastries, toaster pastries, sweet scones (e.g., blueberry, orange cranberry, and chocolate chip), sweet croissants (e.g., chocolate or almond filled), sweet rice puddings (e.g., cinnamon and vanilla), sweet bread puddings (e.g., made with cinnamon, fruits, chocolate, or icing), and sweet pita chips (e.g., cinnamon sugar). For more information, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Grain-based Desserts in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12](#).

grains: Plants in the grass family that produce a dry, edible fruit commonly called a kernel, grain, or berry.

grains component: The meal component of the USDA meal patterns that includes cereal grains and products made from their flours. Creditable grain foods include products and recipes that are WGR or enriched. Creditable cooked and ready-to-eat (RTE) breakfast cereals include products that are WGR, enriched, or fortified. For more information, visit the “[Grains](#)” section of the CSDE’s Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

lactose-free milk: A type of fluid milk that is processed to remove the lactose (naturally occurring sugar) found in regular milk. Lactose-free milk typically has the same nutritional benefits as regular milk, including calcium, protein, and vitamins. Like other types of fluid milk, lactose-free milk comes in a variety of flavors and fat contents. For more information, refer to the CSDE’s resource, [Offering Lactose-Free and Lactose-Reduced Milk in the School Nutrition Programs](#).

lactose-reduced milk: A type of fluid milk that is processed to remove some of the lactose (naturally occurring sugar). Lactose-reduced milk typically has the same nutritional benefits as regular milk, including calcium, protein, and vitamins. Like other types of fluid milk, lactose-reduced milk comes in a variety of flavors and fat contents. For more information, refer to the CSDE’s resource, [Offering Lactose-Free and Lactose-Reduced Milk in the School Nutrition Programs](#).

lean meat and poultry: Defined by the USDA as meat and poultry that contains less than 10 grams of fat, no more than 4.5 grams of saturated fat, and less than 95 milligrams of cholesterol per 100 grams and per labeled serving size, based on the USDA’s definitions for food label use. Examples include 95 percent lean cooked ground beef, beef top round steak or roast, beef tenderloin, pork top loin chop or roast, pork tenderloin, ham or turkey deli slices, skinless chicken breast, and skinless turkey breast.

legumes: A type of plant that includes pods, e.g., soybeans, peanuts, fresh peas, fresh beans, and pulses (beans, peas, and lentils). For more information, refer to “beans, peas, and lentils (pulses)” and “pulses” in this section.

meal components: The five food groups that comprise reimbursable meals in the NSLP (milk, fruits, vegetables, grains, and MMA) and the three food groups that comprise reimbursable breakfasts in the SBP (grains/MMA, fruits with optional vegetable substitutions, and milk). For information on the crediting requirements for each meal component, refer to the CSDE’s [Crediting Guide for the School Nutrition Programs](#) and visit the CSDE’s [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

meal pattern: The required meal components and minimum servings that schools and institutions participating in the USDA's Child Nutrition Programs must provide to receive federal reimbursement for meals and afterschool snacks served to children. For more information, refer to the CSDE's [Guide to the Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program](#) and visit the CSDE's [Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

meals: Refer to "reimbursable meals" in this section.

meat alternates: Foods that provide a similar protein content to meat. Meat alternates include alternate protein products, cheese, eggs, cooked dry beans and peas, nuts and seeds and their butters (except for acorn, chestnut, and coconut), yogurt, soy yogurt, commercial tofu containing at least 5 grams of protein in a $\frac{1}{4}$ -cup (2.2 ounces) serving, and tempeh. For more information, visit the "[Meats and Meat Alternates](#)" section of the CSDE's Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

meats/meat alternates (MMA) component: The meal component of the USDA meal patterns that includes meats (e.g., beef, poultry, and fish) and meat alternates, such as eggs, cheese, yogurt, beans, peas, and lentils, nuts, and seeds. For more information, visit the "[Meats and Meat Alternates](#)" section of the CSDE's Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

menu item: Any planned main dish, vegetable, fruit, bread, grain, or milk that is part of the reimbursable meal. Menu items consist of food items. For more information, refer to "food item" in this section.

milk component: The meal component of the USDA meal patterns that includes pasteurized fluid milk that meets federal and state regulations. The milk component also includes fluid milk substitutes that meet the USDA's nutrition standards for fluid milk substitutes. For more information, refer to "fluid milk substitutes" and "nutrition standards for fluid milk substitutes" in this section, and visit the "[Milk](#)" section of the CSDE's Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

monosaturated fat: A type of unsaturated fat found in olive, canola, peanut, sunflower, and safflower oils, and in avocados, peanut butter, and most nuts. Monosaturated fat may help lower blood cholesterol when used as part of an overall diet that is moderate in fat.

National School Lunch Program (NSLP): The USDA's federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. The NSLP provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost, or free lunches to children each school day. The NSLP was established under the National School Lunch Act, signed by President Harry Truman in 1946. For more information, visit the CSDE's [National School Lunch Program](#) webpage.

natural cheese: Cheese that is produced directly from milk. Examples include cheddar, Colby, Monterey Jack, mozzarella, Muenster, provolone, Swiss, feta, and brie. Natural cheese also includes pasteurized blended cheese that is made by blending one or more different kinds of natural cheese. Natural cheeses do not include pasteurized process cheese (e.g., American), pasteurized process cheese food, pasteurized process cheese spread, or pasteurized process cheese products.

noncreditable foods: Foods and beverages that do not contribute toward the meal patterns for the USDA's Child Nutrition Programs. Noncreditable foods and beverages are either in amounts too small to credit (i.e., foods and beverages that do not provide the minimum creditable amount of a meal component) or they do not belong to the meal components. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resource, [*Noncreditable Foods in the Meal Patterns for the School Nutrition Programs*](#).

noncreditable grains: Grain ingredients that do not contribute to the grains component. Examples include oat fiber, corn fiber, wheat starch, corn starch, and modified food starch (including potato, legume, and other vegetable flours). For more information, refer to the CSDE's [*Guide to Meeting the Whole Grain-rich Requirement for the Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the School Nutrition Programs*](#).

nutrient assessment: A review of school menu records to determine whether they meet the USDA's weekly dietary specifications for calories, saturated fat, and sodium. For more information, refer to "dietary specifications" in this section.

nutrient-dense foods: Foods and beverages that provide vitamins, minerals, and other substances that contribute to adequate nutrient intakes or may have positive health effects, and contain little or no solid fats, added sugars, refined starches, or sodium. Ideally, these foods and beverages are also in forms that retain naturally occurring components, such as dietary fiber. Examples include all vegetables, fruits, whole grains, seafood, eggs, beans and peas, unsalted nuts and seeds, fat-free and low-fat dairy products, and lean meats and poultry (when prepared with little or no added solid fats, sugars, refined starches, and sodium). The term "nutrient dense" indicates the nutrients and other beneficial substances in a food have not been "diluted" by the addition of calories from added solid fats, sugars, or refined starches, or by the solid fats naturally present in the food.

nutrient-rich foods: Refer to "nutrient-dense foods" in this section.

nutrition standards for fluid milk substitutes: The USDA's nutrition requirements for plant-based beverages like soy milk that are used as fluid milk substitutes in the USDA Child Nutrition Programs. The USDA requires that any fluid milk substitutes are nutritionally equivalent to cow's milk and meet the following nutrients per cup (8 fluid ounces): 276 milligrams (mg) of calcium; 8 grams (g) of protein; 150 micrograms (mcg) retinol activity equivalents (RAE) of vitamin A; 2.5 mcg of vitamin D; 24 mg of magnesium; 222 mg of phosphorus; 349 mg of potassium; 0.44 mg of riboflavin; and 1.1 micrograms (mcg) of vitamin B-12. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Allowable Fluid Milk Substitutes for Non-Disability Reasons in the School Nutrition Programs](#).

ounce equivalent (oz eq): A weight-based unit of measure for the grains component and MMA component in the meal patterns for the school nutrition programs. Oz eq account for dry versus cooked grains and variations in MMA. One oz eq of the MMA component is sometimes more than a measured ounce, depending on the food's density and nutritional content. One oz eq of the grains component is less than a measured ounce for some grain foods (e.g., pretzels, breadsticks, and crackers), equal to a measured ounce for some grain foods (e.g., bagels, biscuits, bread, rolls, cereal grains, and RTE breakfast cereals), and more than a measured ounce for some grain foods (e.g., muffins and pancakes). For more information, refer to "Exhibit A chart" in this section and the CSDE's resources, [Crediting Commercial Meat/Meat Alternate Products in the School Nutrition Programs](#) and [Grain Ounce Equivalents Chart for the School Nutrition Programs](#).

polyunsaturated fat: A type of unsaturated fat found in corn, soybean, and cottonseed oils; walnuts; pine nuts; sesame, pumpkin, and flax seeds; and fatty cold-water fish (e.g., salmon, trout, herring, tuna, and mackerel). Polyunsaturated fat may help lower blood cholesterol when consumed as part of an overall diet that is moderate in fat.

pre-fried foods: Commercially prepared foods such as meats, poultry, fish, and vegetables that are fried by the manufacturer during preparation. These foods are usually cooked by the food service operation in the oven or microwave. Pre-fried foods include refrigerated or frozen items that are breaded or battered, most frozen potato products, and most frozen products described as "crispy" or "crunchy." Examples include chicken nuggets, chicken patties, fish sticks, french fries, tater tots, hash browns, and onion rings.

product formulation statement (PFS): An information statement developed by manufacturers that provides specific information about how a product credits toward the USDA's meal patterns, and documents how this information is obtained citing Child Nutrition Program resources or regulations. A PFS does not provide any warranty against audit claims. The USDA requires a PFS for commercial processed products without a CN label that are not listed in the [Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#) (FBG). All creditable ingredients in this statement must match a description in the FBG. The PFS must be prepared on company letterhead with the signature of a company official and the date of issue. The USDA requires that SFAs must verify the PFS for accuracy prior to purchasing, serving, and claiming the product in reimbursable meals and afterschool snacks. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resources, [Using Product Formulation Statements in the School Nutrition Programs](#) and [Accepting Processed Product Documentation in the School Nutrition Programs](#), and visit the "Product Formulation Statements" section of the CSDE's Crediting Documentation for the Child Nutrition Programs webpage.

pulses: The edible dry seeds from legumes, such as beans, peas, and lentils. For more information, refer to "beans, peas, and lentils (pulses)" and "legumes" in this section.

Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA): The average daily dietary intake level that is sufficient to meet the nutrient requirement of most healthy individuals in a particular life stage and gender group. The RDA is one of four reference values that comprise the Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs). For more information, refer to "Dietary Reference Intakes" in this section.

refined grains: Grains that have been processed to remove the bran and germ, making the product less nutritious than whole grains. Refined grains may or may not be enriched. For more information, refer to "enriched grains" in this section.

reimbursable meals: Meals that offer the required meal components and minimum servings for each grade group of the NSLP and SBP meal patterns.

residential child care institution (RCCI): RCCIs include but are not limited to homes for the mentally, emotionally or physically impaired, and unmarried mothers and their infants; group homes; halfway houses; orphanages; temporary shelters for abused children and for runaway children; long-term care facilities for chronically ill children; and juvenile detention centers. A long-term care facility is a hospital, skilled nursing facility, intermediate care facility, or distinct part thereof, which is intended for the care of children confined for 30 days or more.

saturated fat: A type of fat that raises blood cholesterol, which is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Major sources of saturated fat include coconut oil, palm oil, palm kernel oil, butter, and beef fat. Saturated fat is also found in other animal fats, such as pork and chicken fats, and in other plant fats, such as nuts. For more information, refer to "solid fats" in this section.

School Breakfast Program (SBP): The USDA's federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. The SBP provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost, or free breakfasts to children each school day. The SBP was established under the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 to ensure that all children have access to a healthy breakfast at school to promote learning readiness and healthy eating behaviors. For more information, visit the CSDE's [School Breakfast Program](#) webpage.

school food authority (SFA): The governing body that is responsible for the administration of one or more schools and has the legal authority to operate the USDA's school nutrition programs.

school nutrition programs: The USDA's school nutrition programs include the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Afterschool Snack Program (ASP) of the NSLP, Seamless Summer Option (SSO) of the NSLP, Special Milk Program (SMP), Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP), and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) At-risk Supper Program implemented in schools. For more information, visit the CSDE's [School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

Seamless Summer Option (SSO) of the NSLP: The USDA's federally assisted summer feeding program that combines features of the NSLP, SBP, and SFSP, and serves meals free of charge to children ages 18 and younger from low-income areas. School districts participating in the NSLP or SBP are eligible to apply to the CSDE to participate in the SSO. SSO meals follow the NSLP and SBP meal patterns. For more information, visit the [Seamless Summer Option \(SSO\) of the NSLP](#) webpage.

serving size or portion: The weight, measure, number of pieces, or slices of a food or beverage. SFAs must provide the minimum serving sizes specified in the USDA meal patterns for meals and afterschool snacks to be reimbursable.

simple carbohydrates (sugars): Carbohydrates consisting of one sugar (e.g., fructose and galactose) or two sugars (e.g., lactose, maltose, and sucrose). Sugars can be naturally present in foods (such as the fructose in fruit or the lactose in milk) or added to foods (such as sucrose or table sugar). Foods that naturally contain simple carbohydrates (such as fruits, milk, and milk products, and some vegetables) also contain vitamins and minerals. Foods that contain large amounts of added sugars (such as cookies, candy, pastries, sweetened baked goods, regular soft drinks, and other sweetened drinks) provide calories with few, if any, nutrients. For more information, refer to "added sugars" in this section.

sodium: A mineral that helps maintain the body's fluid balance and blood pressure. Diets that are high in sodium can increase the risk of high blood pressure in individuals who are sodium sensitive.

solid fats: Fats that are usually not liquid at room temperature. Solid fats are found in most animal foods but also can be made from vegetable oils through hydrogenation. Some common solid fats include butter, beef fat (tallow, suet), chicken fat, pork fat (lard), stick margarine, coconut oil, palm oil, and shortening. Foods high in solid fats include full-fat (regular) cheese, cream, whole milk, ice cream, well-marbled cuts of meats, regular ground beef, bacon, sausages, poultry skin, and many baked goods (such as cookies, crackers, donuts, pastries, and croissants). Solid fats contain more saturated fat. For more information, refer to “saturated fat” in this section.

standard operating procedure (SOP): A detailed explanation of how to implement a policy through specific practices or tasks. SOPs standardize the process and provide step-by-step instructions that enable everyone to perform the task in a consistent manner. This ensures that all staff follow the same procedures each time. For examples of SOPs, visit the Institute of Child Nutrition’s [Standard Operating Procedures](#) webpage.

standardized recipe: A recipe that been tried, adapted, and retried at least three times and has been found to produce the same good results and yield every time when the exact procedures are used with the same type of equipment and the same quantity and quality of ingredients. Standardized recipes include specific information such as ingredients, weights and measures, preparation directions, serving directions, yield, and portion size. For more information, refer to the Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition’s [USDA Recipe Standardization Guide for School Nutrition Programs](#), the CSDE’s [Guide to Menu Documentation for the School Nutrition Programs](#), and visit the “[Standardized Recipes](#)” section of the CSDE’s Crediting Documentation for the Child Nutrition Programs webpage.

sucrose: Another name for table sugar. Sucrose contains glucose and fructose. For more information, refer to “simple carbohydrates (sugars)” in this section.

sugars: Refer to “added sugars” and “simple carbohydrates” in this section.

vegetable subgroups: The five categories of vegetables within the vegetables component that are required over the week in the NSLP meal patterns for grades K-12. The subgroups include dark green, red/orange, beans, peas, and lentils, starchy, and other vegetables. For more information, refer to the CSDE’s resource, [Vegetable Subgroups in the National School Lunch Program](#), and visit the “[Vegetables](#)” section of the CSDE’s Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

vegetables component: The meal component of the USDA meal patterns that includes vegetables (fresh, frozen, canned, and dried) and pasteurized full-strength juice; and includes five subgroups. Vegetable juice cannot exceed half of the weekly vegetable offerings at lunch or breakfast. For more information, visit the “[Vegetables](#)” section of the CSDE’s Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

whole foods: Foods that are unprocessed or minimally processed and do not contain added ingredients such as fat, sugars, or sodium.

whole fruits and vegetables: Fresh, frozen, canned, and dried fruits and vegetables that are unprocessed or minimally processed, and do not contain added ingredients such as fat, sugars, and sodium.

whole grain-rich (meal patterns for grades K-12): Foods in groups A-G and H are WGR if they meet two criteria: 1) the grain content is between 50 and 100 percent whole grain with any remaining grains being enriched; and 2) any noncreditable grains are less than 2 percent of the product formula (or less than $\frac{1}{4}$ oz eq per portion), i.e., no more than 3.99 grams per portion for groups A-G (baked goods) or 6.99 grams per portion for group H (cereal grains). Ready-to-eat (RTE) and cooked breakfast cereals (group I) are WGR criteria if they meet three criteria: 1) the first ingredient is a whole grain and the cereal is fortified, or the cereal is 100 percent whole grain; 2) noncreditable grains do not exceed 6.99 grams per portion; and 3) added sugars do not exceed 6 grams per dry ounce. Fortification is not required for 100 whole grain cereals. For more information, refer to the CSDE's resources, [Guide to Meeting the Whole Grain-rich Requirement for the Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the School Nutrition Programs](#) and [Crediting Breakfast Cereals in the School Nutrition Programs](#), and visit "[Whole Grain-rich Requirement](#)" in the "Grains" section of the Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage.

whole grains: Grains that consist of the entire kernel, including the starchy endosperm, the fiber-rich bran, and the nutrient-rich germ. All grains start out as whole grains, but many are processed to remove the bran and germ, which also removes many of the nutrients. Whole grains are nutrient rich, containing vitamins, minerals, fiber, antioxidants, and health-enhancing phytonutrients such as lignans and flavonoids. Examples of whole grains include whole wheat, whole oats, oatmeal, whole-grain cornmeal, brown rice, whole rye, whole barley, wild rice, buckwheat, and bulgur (cracked wheat). For more information, refer to the CSDE's resource, [Crediting Whole Grains in the School Nutrition Programs](#).

whole-grain flour: Flour made by grinding the entire whole-grain kernel, including the fiber-rich bran, nutrient-rich germ, and starchy endosperm. Flour or meal that does not contain all parts of the grain is not whole grain, e.g., degermed corn, milled rice, and wheat flour.

