Sodium Limits for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12

This guidance applies to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) meal patterns for grades K-12.

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Overview of Dietary Specifications for School Meals

The NSLP and SBP meal patterns for grades K-12 include nutrition standards (known as dietary specifications) that reflect current dietary science based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The purpose of these dietary specifications is to provide nutrient-dense school meals that help combat the dual problems of childhood obesity and hunger.

Dietary Specifications for Sodium

The USDA final rule, *Transitional Standards for Milk, Whole Grains and Sodium*, established transitional sodium standards for NSLP and SBP meals 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 lunch and breakfast through school year 2026-27 (June 30, 2027) and codifies a single sodium reduction for both programs. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the current sodium limits for each grade group at lunch and breakfast through school year 2026-27 (June 30, 2027) and the final sodium limits that take effect by July 1, 2027. Sodium levels are listed in milligrams (mg).

- **NSLP:** By school year 2027-28, school food authorities (SFAs) must implement a reduction of about 15 percent from current sodium levels.
- **SBP:** By school year 2027-28, SFAs must implement a reduction of about 10 percent from current sodium levels.

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 by balancing them with lower sodium meals and menu items throughout the week.

The USDA encourages schools to gradually reduce sodium at lunch and breakfast prior to the implementation deadline of July 1, 2027, by adjusting food preparation methods and purchasing lower sodium foods.

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Weekly 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

The optional lunch meal pattern for grades K-8 may be used by schools with grade configurations that prevent students from being separated into the required K-5 and 6-8 grade groups. This meal pattern requires a narrower calorie range and more restrictive sodium limit because the weekly amounts cannot exceed the highest level for each grade group or go below the lowest level for each grade group.

Weekly 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

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The optional breakfast meal patterns for grades K-8, 6-12, and K-12 may be used by schools with grade configurations that prevent students from being separated into the required K-5, 6-8, and K-12 grade groups. These meal patterns require a narrower calorie range and more restrictive sodium limit because the weekly amounts cannot exceed the highest level for each grade group or go below the lowest level for each grade group.



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Resources

Fact Sheet: Reducing Sodium in the Diets of American Children (American Heart Association):
https://www.heart.org/-/media/Files/About-Us/Policy-Research/Fact-Sheets/Access-to-Healthy-Food/Reducing-Sodium-in-the-Diet-of-US-Children-Fact-Sheet.pdf

Guide to the Dietary Specifications for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 (CSDE):
https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/mpg/guide_dietary_specifications_nslp_sbp_k12.pdf

Implementation Timeline for Updated Nutrition Requirements in School Meals (USDA):
https://www.fna.usda.gov/cn/school-nutrition-standards-updates/implementation-timeline-school-meals

Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs (CSDE webpage):
https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/meal-patterns-school-nutrition-programs

Menu Planning for Child Nutrition Programs (CSDE webpage):
https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/menu-planning

Menu Planning Guidance for School Meals for Grades K-12 (CSDE webpage):
https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/menu-planning-guidance-for-school-meals

National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Regulations 7 CFR 220.8(f)(4): Sodium:
https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/part-220#p-220.8(f)(4)

Nutrition Standards for School Meals (USDA webpage):
https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/nutrition-standards-school-meals

School Breakfast Program (SBP) Regulations 7 CFR 210.10(f)(4): Sodium:
https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/part-210#p-210.10(f)(4)

Shaking it Up initiative (Institute of Child Nutrition):
https://theicn.org/icn-resources-a-z/shaking-it-up/

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Sodium ("Dietary Specifications" section of 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#Sodium

Sodium (USDA's Updates to the School Nutrition Standards webpage):
https://www.fna.usda.gov/cn/school-nutrition-standards-updates/sodium

USDA Final Rule: Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (89 FR 31962):
https://www.fna.usda.gov/cn/fr-042524

USDA Final Rule: Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs (Final Rule 77 FR 4087):
https://www.fna.usda.gov/cn/fr-012612

USDA Final Rule Transitional Standards for Milk, Whole Grains and Sodium (87 FR 6984):
https://www.fna.usda.gov/cn/fr-020722

USDA Memo SP 19-2024, CACFP 07-2024, and SFSP 12-2024: Initial Implementation Memorandum: Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (USDA):
https://www.fna.usda.gov/cn/initial-implementation-meal-patterns-dga

What's in a Meal Module 6: Dietary Specifications (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

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For more information, visit the Connecticut State Department of Education's (CSDE) Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs webpage or contact the school nutrition programs staff at the Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of Child Nutrition Programs, 450 Columbus Boulevard, Suite 504, Hartford, CT 06103-1841. This document is available at https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/nslp/mealpattern/sodium_limits_nslp_sbp.pdf.

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