

School Food Questions & Answers

Are school meals nutritious?

- School meals are healthy meals that meet science-based, federal nutrition standards. Schools must offer the right balance of fruits, vegetables, milk, whole grains and lean proteins with every meal.
- Updated [federal nutrition standards](#) require schools to offer more fruits, vegetables and whole grains, while meeting calorie, fat and sodium limits.
 - No more than 10 percent of calories can come from saturated fat and schools must eliminate added trans-fat.
 - School meals now offer larger servings of produce, and children must take at least one serving.
 - Cafeterias offer weekly servings of dark green and red/orange vegetables and legumes.
 - Milk must be fat-free or 1%.
- Under the [Smart Snacks in School rule](#), which took effect in July 2014, items sold in school vending machines, snack bars and a la carte lines also meet nutrition standards, limiting portion size, calories, fat, sugar and sodium. These standards do not apply to food that students bring from home.
- A School Nutrition Association [survey](#) found that nationwide, school meal programs are offering more locally grown foods and are utilizing a variety of tactics to increase student consumption of these healthy options, including student taste tests, salad bars and nutrition education initiatives.

But what about the obesity crisis among America's children?

- Research shows school meals play an important role in supporting overall student health and obesity prevention by improving children's diets and combatting food insecurity:
 - Children receiving school lunches consume fewer empty calories and more milk, fruit, vegetables and fiber than their peers. They are also more likely to have appropriate intakes of calcium, vitamin A and zinc.
 - School lunches are healthier than typical packed lunches. School lunches contained fewer calories, fat, saturated fat and sugar than lunches brought from home.
 - School lunch participation is associated with a lower body mass index (BMI).

- School breakfast participation is also linked to a lower body mass index (BMI), lower probability of being overweight or obese and improved diet quality.
- *Click on the links for more information, including research study sources, for the [School Breakfast Program](#) and [National School Lunch Program](#)*
- Students eat about 17% of their meals each year in schools – with the remainder eaten at home or in restaurants.
- Addressing the childhood obesity crisis is a community-wide effort - with a significant focus on increasing children’s physical activity, reducing screen time, as well as promoting healthy diets at home and throughout the school day.

How are school nutrition programs working to make healthy meals kid-friendly?

- Children can be notoriously picky eaters, but school nutrition professionals are always working to find new healthy recipes that children are willing to eat and creative ways to serve these nutritious choices. Many school districts conduct student taste tests to involve students in menu planning.
- Schools are making student favorites healthier, such as serving pizza on whole grain crust with low-sodium sauce and low-fat cheese. Students often don’t even notice the difference.
- School nutrition programs also work to incorporate culturally appropriate foods into their menus to appeal to the tastes of their diverse student populations, as well as provide alternative foods for students with dietary restrictions and allergies.

What about processed foods served in school lunch rooms?

- Food companies are partnering with schools to develop cleaner label menu options with fewer artificial flavors, colors or preservatives. In a recent SNA [survey](#), more than half (56%) of districts reported serving cleaner label choices.
- While many schools are working to increase the amount of freshly prepared and scratch-made menu items, those with limited equipment or labor resources rely on healthy pre-prepared foods to ensure students receive balanced meals each day.

- Pre-prepared foods served in schools are made with healthier ingredients, less fat, sodium and sugar.
 - Pizzas are prepared with whole grain crusts, low-sodium sauce and reduced fat cheese.
 - Chicken nuggets use whole grain breading and are baked rather than fried.
 - French fries are prepared without trans-fat and baked instead of fried. Many schools now serve baked sweet potato fries.
 - Many name brand cereals in schools have improved nutrition standards compared to what a family would buy at a store.

Why are schools serving flavored milk?

- School meals offer flavored milk as an option because experts agree that to ensure intake of calcium, vitamin D, protein and other key nutrients to support growth and development, it is better for children and adolescents to drink flavored milk than to avoid milk altogether.
- Research shows that children who drink flavored milk meet more of their nutrient needs; do not consume more added sugar, fat or calories; and are not heavier than non-milk drinkers. The Institute of Medicine, in their recommended nutrition standards for school meals (“[School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children](#)”), supported keeping fat-free flavored milk in schools because of the critical nutrients that flavored milk provides.
- Since 2007, the dairy industry has reduced the added sugars in school milk by about 55 percent. The majority of flavored milk served in school is 150 calories or less, with an average of 122 calories – just 25 more calories than white milk.
- On average, flavored milk contributes only 4 percent of the added sugars in children’s diets, while providing nine essential nutrients.

Is soda for sale with school lunch?

- Under federal nutrition standards, schools may only offer low-fat or fat-free milk as part of the complete school lunch.
- New Smart Snacks in School rules also limit the beverage choices that schools may sell a la carte, or in school vending machines and snack bars. These rules prohibit the sale of full-calorie sodas in all schools during the school day. Only high schools are permitted to sell no- or low-calorie sodas.

Are school meals safe?

- School nutrition professionals care for the children we serve. Through strict food safety procedures and staff training, we maintain a superior safety record while providing nutritious meals to millions of students each day.
- To ensure meals are safe, schools are required to implement strict food safety programs to identify and eliminate food safety hazards at every step – from purchasing and receiving, to storing, preparing and holding.
 - Schools follow steps in preparation and serving such as maintaining records of cooking, cooling, and reheating temperatures in the food preparation process.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data indicates school nutrition programs across the country maintain exceptional food safety records.
 - While any food safety issue is concerning, parents should feel assured by a recent CDC report showing that only 1% of foodborne disease outbreaks were caused by food consumed at school.
 - Food prepared at home caused 10% of outbreaks and 61% were attributed to restaurant fare.
- Just like restaurants, schools are regularly inspected by the county health department, making sure their safety regulations are followed. In fact, schools are inspected twice a year, and restaurants are only inspected once a year.
- Federal standards mandate that school nutrition professionals – *including part time staff* - must participate in annual continuing education or training.

Why aren't schools serving more organic foods?

- Schools are focused on increasing availability and variety of fruits and vegetables served, especially locally grown seasonal options.
- Organic food is much more expensive than conventionally farmed foods, creating a significant barrier for financially strained school meal programs.
- By law, with few exceptions, food served through the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs must be grown in the USA, subject to USDA inspections and standards.

Why do school meals include so many carbohydrates?

- Carbohydrates provide energy to cells in the body, particularly the brain, and are essential for proper development.
- Healthy foods such as certain fruits, vegetables and whole grains are high in carbohydrates while providing the body critical nutrients and dietary fiber, without added sugars.
- School meals meet federal nutrition standards, based on the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, which ensure school cafeterias offer right-sized portions of nutrient rich, complex carbohydrates. These recently-updated standards ensure every school meal includes fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

Why does school breakfast seem to include so many sugary foods?

- School breakfast and lunch meet calorie maximums, which effectively limit the amount of added sugars in school meals.
- School breakfast options are lower in sugar than many of the breakfast choices sold in grocery stores or restaurants.
- Every school breakfast offers students a full cup of fruit (natural sugars), and we encourage students to eat these healthy choices.

Is a lot of food getting thrown away in the cafeteria?

- School meals are only nutritious if students eat them, so we work hard to prepare meals that are healthy *and* student approved.
 - We host taste tests and gather feedback to identify new recipes and options that appeal to students.
 - We offer a variety of nutritious menu options each day so all our students can choose something they want to eat.
 - Our *salad bars* allow students to customize meals to their preferences.
 - Through our *farm to school* program we encourage students to try all the fruits and vegetables available with school meals.
- Sometimes students aren't hungry for all of the foods offered with school meals. Our cafeteria "No Thank You" tables allow students to share items like unopened cartons of milk or whole fruit with their peers, ensuring those foods don't go to waste.

My student says school lunch doesn't offer enough food.

- School meals meet age appropriate calorie limits to ensure students receive right sized portions with each meal. However, many students choose not to take all the foods offered with school meals.
- Every school lunch includes milk, fruits, vegetables, whole grains and a lean protein, and we encourage students to take all these choices. It can be helpful for parents to review menu options with their children to encourage them to take advantage of the variety offered.
- Students who are hungry for more are encouraged to take an additional fruit or vegetable from the salad bar with their meals.