

FACTS ABOUT SCHOOL MEALS

Are school meals nutritious?

- School meals are healthy meals that meet science-based, federal nutrition standards requiring schools to offer the right balance of fruits, vegetables, milk, whole grains and lean proteins with every meal.
- Recently updated [federal nutrition standards](#) require schools to offer more fruits, vegetables and whole grains, while limiting the calories, fat and sodium in school meals.
 - No more than 10 percent of calories can come from saturated fat and schools must eliminate added trans-fat.
 - School cafeterias must meet calorie limits and gradually reduce sodium in school meals.
 - All grains offered in the cafeteria must be whole-grain rich.
 - Schools must offer larger servings of vegetables and fruit with every school meal, and children must take at least one serving.
 - Cafeterias must offer a wide variety of vegetables, including at least a weekly serving of dark green and red/orange vegetables and legumes.
 - Milk must be fat-free or 1% (flavored milk must be fat-free).
- 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 new nutrition standards, limiting portion size, calories, fat, sugar and sodium. These standards do not apply to food that students bring from home.
- [A recent School Nutrition Association survey](#) found that nationwide, school meal programs have increased healthy options for students, including locally sourced fruits and vegetables, and expanded ethnic menu choices to appeal to diverse student tastes.
- School cafeteria staff are also promoting these healthier options to students through taste tests of new menu items, farm to school programs and other creative initiatives to teach students about healthy choices and get them engaged in the school menu planning process.

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

- Research shows school meals contribute to healthy weights and are more nutritious than packed lunches:
 - [A study published in the Journal of Econometrics](#) found that the National School Lunch Program improves the health outcomes of children who reside in low-



income households, reducing the rate of obesity by at least 17 percent, poor general health by 29 percent, and the prevalence of food insecurity by 3.8 percent.

- [A study published in the American Journal of Public Health](#) found that children tend to gain more weight during the summer time than when they are in school. The study stated that “it appears that they [schools] are healthier than most children’s non-school environments.”
 - [A study published in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association](#) found that “school lunch participants were significantly more likely than nonparticipants to consume milk, fruit, and vegetables, and significantly less likely to consume desserts, snack items, and beverages other than milk or 100% juice.”
 - [A study published in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior](#) found “school lunches were more likely to meet nutrition standards than packed lunches, especially for fat and saturated fat” and “provided increased exposure to fruits and vegetables compared with packed lunches,” which contained more dessert items, savory snacks and sugar-sweetened beverages.
- 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 will take 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 healthy choices. Many school districts conduct student taste tests to involve students in menu planning.
- Schools and the foodservice industry 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 meet 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?

- 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 are now serving baked sweet potato fries.
- 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.

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 nutrients important for growth and development, it is better for children and adolescents to drink flavored milk than to avoid milk altogether. In fact, leading health and nutrition organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Heart Association, Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the National Medical Association, and School Nutrition Association, [have all expressed their support](#) for low-fat and fat-free milk in schools, including flavored milk.
- On average, today's fat free flavored milk in schools has 122 calories per serving and sugars have been cut dramatically by 45% in the past six years.

Is beverages are sold with school lunch?

- Under federal nutrition standards, schools may only offer low-fat or fat-free milk, water, or, on occasion, 100% fruit juice 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. These rules prohibit the sale of full-calorie sodas in all schools during the school day.

Are school meals safe?



- School nutrition professionals care for the children they serve, and through strict food safety procedures and staff training, they maintain a superior safety record while providing nutritious meals to millions of children each day.
- To ensure their meals are safe, schools follow steps in preparation and serving such as preheating transfer carts before food is transported and 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.
 - In fact, the CDC's most recent Surveillance for Foodborne Disease Outbreaks showed that less than 3 percent of outbreaks attributed to a single place of food preparation were caused by food prepared at school, whereas restaurant fare caused 68 percent of outbreaks and food prepared at home caused 9 percent of outbreaks.

Why aren't schools serving more organic foods?

- Schools are focused on increasing availability and variety of fruits and vegetables served, whether conventionally farmed or organically farmed.
- Organic food is much more expensive than conventionally farmed foods, creating a significant barrier for financially strained school meal programs.
- There is no conclusive scientific evidence that organic food is superior with regard to food safety or nutrition. Conventional and organic foods contain the same vitamins and nutrients. Even the USDA, which certifies organic food, does not claim that these products are safer or more nutritious than conventionally grown foods.
- 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.

