

Topic: Lunch Meal Pattern At a Glance

Overview

By regulation, school meals must be based on the goals of the latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans. USDA sets school meal nutrition standards to ensure that schools offer students the right balance of fruits, vegetables, low-fat or fat-free milk, whole grains, and protein rich foods.

Requirements:

School Food Authorities (SFAs) must offer the meal components and quantities required in the lunch meal pattern based on the age/grade group served.

Age/grade groups are:

- K-5 (kindergarten through 5th grade)
- 6-8 (6th through 8th grade)
- 9-12 (9th through 12th grade)

Note: The meal pattern requirements for K-5 and 6-8 grades overlap, so it is possible to meet both age/ grade requirements with a single menu if:

- Daily and weekly requirements are met.
- Meals meet average weekly dietary specifications for calories, saturated fat, added sugar and sodium as specified in the meal patterns.

The standard meal pattern is based on a five-day week with adjusted meal patterns based on shorter and longer weeks.

Lunch Meal Pattern: Based on a 5 Day Week			
Amount of Food Per Week (Minimum Per Day)			
Meal Components:	Grades K-5	Grades 6-8	Grades 9-12
Fruits (cups)	2 ½ (½)	2 ½ (½)	5 (1)
Vegetables (cups)	3 ¾ (¾)	3 ¾ (¾)	5 (1)
Dark Green	½	½	½
Red/Orange	¾	¾	1 ¼
Beans/Peas/Lentils	½	½	½
Starchy	½	½	½
Other	½	½	¾
Additional vegetables to reach weekly total	1	1	1 ½
Grains (oz. equivalent)	8-9 (1)	8-10 (1)	10-12 (2)
Meat/Meat Alternate (oz. equivalent)	8-10 (1)	9-10 (1)	10-12 (2)
Fluid Milk (cups)	5 (1)	5 (1)	5 (1)
Dietary Specifications: Average Daily Amount			
Minimum-Maximum Calories	550-650	600-700	750-850
Sodium Limit (In place through June 30, 2027)	≤1110 mg	≤1225 mg	≤1280 mg
Sodium Limit (Implemented by July 1, 2027)	≤935 mg	≤1035 mg	≤1080 mg
Saturated Fat (% of total calories) saturated fat from fluid milk can be omitted when calculating the weekly average saturated fat requirement for lunch.	<10	<10	<10
Added Sugar (% of total calories) (Implemented by July 1, 2027)	<10	<10	<10

Meal Pattern Components:

Meat/Meat Alternate:

Grades	Daily Minimum Requirement	Weekly Minimum Requirement
K-5	1 oz. equivalent	8 oz. equivalents
6-8	1 oz. equivalent	9 oz. equivalents
9-12	2 oz. equivalents	10 oz. equivalents

- SFA's serving Grades K-5 and 6-8 must offer more than the minimum daily amount to meet the weekly minimum requirement.
- The minimum meat/meat alternate amount that can contribute to the meal pattern is a 0.25 oz equivalent.
- Cooked dry beans, peas, and lentils may be counted as either a vegetable or as a meat alternate but not as both in the same meal. Beans, peas, and lentils served as a meat alternate may count towards the weekly vegetable subgroup requirement. When counting beans, peas, or lentils as a meat alternate, additional vegetables must be offered to meet the daily and weekly vegetable requirement.

Grains:

Grades	Daily Minimum Requirement	Weekly Minimum Requirement
K-5	1 oz. equivalent	8 oz. equivalents
6-8	1 oz. equivalent	8 oz. equivalents
9-12	2 oz. equivalents	10 oz. equivalents

- SFA's serving Grades K-5 and 6-8 must offer more than the minimum daily amount to meet the weekly requirement.
- The minimum grain amount that can contribute to the meal pattern is a 0.25 oz equivalent.
- Up to 2 oz. eq. of grain-based desserts may be credited towards the grain component per week.
- At least 80% of grains must be whole grain-rich and all other grain items offered must be enriched.

Fluid Milk:

Grades	Daily Minimum Requirement	Weekly Minimum Requirement
K-5	1 Cup	5 Cups
6-8	1 Cup	5 Cups
9-12	1 Cup	5 Cups

At lunch, schools may offer whole, reduced-fat, low-fat, and fat-free fluid milk. Milk can be flavored or unflavored, provided that unflavored milk is offered at each meal service. Flavored milk may not contain more than 10 grams of added sugars per 8 fluid ounces. At least two types of allowable milk must be offered. Saturated fat in milk may be omitted from weekly dietary specification calculations for lunch. All other dietary specifications from milk (including calories, sodium, and beginning July 1, 2027, added sugars) must still be included in calculations.

Vegetables:

Grades	Daily Minimum Requirement	Weekly Minimum Requirement
K-5	$\frac{3}{4}$ Cup	3 $\frac{3}{4}$ Cups
6-8	$\frac{3}{4}$ Cup	3 $\frac{3}{4}$ Cups
9-12	1 Cup	5 Cups

- Full strength juice may be offered to meet up to one-half of the weekly vegetable requirement. All juice must be 100% juice.
- The minimum vegetable amount that can contribute to the meal pattern is a 1/8 cup.
- Leafy green vegetables credit as one half the volume served. For example, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup lettuce = $\frac{1}{4}$ cup vegetable.
- Cooked dry beans, peas, and lentils may be counted as either a vegetable or as a meat alternate but not as both in the same meal.

The vegetable component consists of a variety of subgroups that must be offered over the week. SFA's must ensure that all students have the opportunity to select each of the vegetable subgroups over the week.

Vegetable Subgroups	K-5	6-8	9-12
Dark Green	$\frac{1}{2}$ Cup	$\frac{1}{2}$ Cup	$\frac{1}{2}$ Cup
Red/Orange	$\frac{3}{4}$ Cup	$\frac{3}{4}$ Cup	1 $\frac{1}{4}$ Cups
Beans/Peas/Lentils	$\frac{1}{2}$ Cup	$\frac{1}{2}$ Cup	$\frac{1}{2}$ Cup
Starchy	$\frac{1}{2}$ Cup	$\frac{1}{2}$ Cup	$\frac{1}{2}$ Cup
Other	$\frac{1}{2}$ Cup	$\frac{1}{2}$ Cup	$\frac{3}{4}$ Cup
Additional vegetables to meet total	1 cup	1 cup	1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups

- The "Other vegetables" requirement may be met with any additional amounts from the dark green, red/orange, and beans/peas/lentils vegetable subgroups.
- Once the weekly vegetable subgroups have been met, any vegetable subgroup may be offered to meet the total weekly vegetable required.

Fruit:

Grades	Daily Minimum Requirement	Weekly Minimum Requirement
K-5	$\frac{1}{2}$ Cup	2 $\frac{1}{2}$ Cups
6-8	$\frac{1}{2}$ Cup	2 $\frac{1}{2}$ Cups
9-12	1 Cup	5 Cups

- Menu planners may allow students to select more than the daily minimum serving for fruit if the dietary specifications for average lunches offered over the school week are met.
- Full strength juice may be offered to meet up to one-half of the weekly fruit requirement. All juice must be 100% juice.
- The minimum quantity that may be credited towards the fruit component is $\frac{1}{8}$ cup.
- Dry fruit credits as double the amount served. Ex. $\frac{1}{4}$ cup dried fruit = $\frac{1}{2}$ cup fruit.

Added Sugars

The following added sugar product-based limits apply:

- Breakfast cereals may have no more than 6 grams of added sugar per dry ounce.
- Yogurt may have no more than 12 grams of added sugar per 6 ounces
- Flavored milk may have no more than 10 grams of added sugar per 8 fluid ounces.

Offer Versus Serve at Lunch

Offer Versus Serve (OVS) is a provision in the National School Lunch Program that allows students to decline some of the food offered. The goals of OVS are to reduce food waste in the school meals programs while permitting students to decline foods they do not intend to eat.

- Offer versus Serve (OVS) is required for lunches served in high school, but optional at elementary and middle schools.
- All five required meal components must be offered to students in at least the minimum daily requirements.
- Students must be allowed to decline two of the five meal components.
- Students must select at least three of the five meal components including at least ½ cup of fruit and/or vegetable for the meal to be reimbursable.
- Students, servers, and cashiers must be able to identify a reimbursable meal.
- Signage explaining what constitutes a reimbursable meal to students including the requirement to select at least ½ cup fruit and/or vegetables must be posted at or close to the beginning of the service line.

Helpful Resources

[USDA Updates to the School Nutrition Standards](#)

[Five Day NSLP Meal Pattern Chart](#)

[Short and Long Week NSLP Meal Pattern Chart](#)

[Offer versus Serve Manual](#)

[Offer versus Serve Lunch Tip Sheet](#)

Regulatory Reference

[CFR 210.10](#) Meal Requirements for Lunches

[USDA Memo SP-1 2026](#) Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025 – Implementation Requirements for the National School Lunch Program

[USDA Memo SP-19 2024](#) Initial Implementation Memorandum: Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent With the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans

Acronym Reference and Definitions

NSLP	National School Lunch Program
OVS	Offer versus Serve
SFA	School Food Authority
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations

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