

A FAMILY'S GUIDE TO

School Nutrition Programs

School nutrition programs have a long history of meeting the food and nutrition needs of children. Children need to be well nourished and school meals help meet this goal.



School meals must meet nutrition standards. By law, the meals offered in schools that are part of the national program must provide

- one-fourth of a student's daily nutrition needs at breakfast.
- one-third of a student's daily nutrition needs at lunch.

School nutrition programs also promote good health for a lifetime. Foods and eating habits encouraged in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* are emphasized in school nutrition programs.

School Nutrition Standards

Meals must meet minimums for these nutrients:

- Protein
- Energy (calories)
- Vitamin A
- Vitamin C
- Calcium
- Iron

The meals also limit these nutrients:

- Total fat – not more than 30% of total calories over the menu week
- Saturated fat – less than 10% of total calories over the menu week

Each state monitors and may set meal standards to meet current dietary guidelines:

- Increase fiber-rich whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and legumes
- Decrease foods high in sodium/salt
- Limit foods rich in dietary cholesterol

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School Nutrition Programs, continued

School meals are offered to all students. Children from homes with limited incomes may have access to free or reduced-price meal benefits. School nutrition staffs work hard to meet the needs of all students.

Most school nutrition programs are self-supporting and operate on a limited budget. All program costs (food, labor, equipment, and supplies) are funded by the meal price and federal money.

Most often, school nutrition programs have a separate budget in the school district and do not receive local tax money.

Programs must follow rules to receive federal money.

This project has been funded at least in part by the Delta Health Alliance (DHA) through HRSA Grant Number U1FRH0741. The Delta Health Alliance is a non-profit organization based in Stoneville, Mississippi, that advocates, develops, and implements collaborative programs to improve the health of citizens in the Delta through the support of partnerships that increase access and availability of health care, conduct and apply health research, or offer health education programs that foster healthy lifestyles. For more information about the Delta Health Alliance visit www.deltahealthalliance.org.

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Special Nutrition Needs

School nutrition programs follow federal laws written by Congress. The Department of Agriculture explains the laws in USDA Guidance. By law, school nutrition programs must make meal changes for a student with a documented disability. For other medical or dietary needs, the school nutrition program decides meal changes on a case-by-case basis.

Disabilities and Special Nutrition Needs

Laws require school nutrition programs to make changes as needed for students with documented disabilities.

“A person with a disability is a person who has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a record of such impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment.” (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2001). Examples of disabilities include cerebral palsy, diabetes, and food anaphylaxis (severe food allergy).

School nutrition programs must have a signed physician statement on file before making any disability-based changes to a student’s meal.

Recognized Medical Authorities

- Physician
- Physician assistant
- Nurse practitioner
- Other professionals specified by the State agency



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Other Medical or Dietary Reasons for Special Nutrition Needs

“The school nutrition program is encouraged, but not required, to provide food substitutions or modifications for children without disabilities with medically certified special dietary needs who are unable to eat regular meals as prepared.” (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2001).

A recognized medical authority must identify a student’s special dietary needs in a signed statement before any changes can be made.

The school nutrition program then decides the changes that can be provided on a case-by-case basis.

Reference: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2001). *Accommodating children with special dietary needs in the school nutrition programs: Guidance for school food service staff*. Retrieved February 26, 2009, from http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Guidance/special_dietary_needs.pdf

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Understanding the Difference Between Disabilities and Other Health Concerns

A request may be made for meal changes to meet special nutrition needs for either disabilities or other health concerns. In either case, the goal is the same – to help your student be well nourished and able to succeed in school.

A similar process is followed in both cases. For a disability, the school nutrition program needs a signed statement from a physician. This statement provides specific required information regarding special nutrition needs. A written statement from a recognized medical authority is needed for changes for other medical or dietary reasons.

This information guides the meal changes. School nutrition programs make reasonable changes at no extra cost to students. Refer to the **Special Nutrition Needs for Other Health Concerns and Disability-Based Special Nutrition Needs** sections to see which fits your child's needs.



Special Nutrition Needs for Other Health Concerns

- Provided on case-by-case basis by each school nutrition program
- Requires a signed statement from a recognized medical authority (physician, physician assistant, nurse practitioner, or other professionals specified by the State agency)
- Reasonable changes
- Provided at no extra cost

Examples may include:

Overweight
Lactose intolerance or other food sensitivity

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Understanding the Difference Between Disabilities and Other Health Concerns, continued

Disability-Based Special Nutrition Needs

- Protected by law
- Requires a signed statement from a licensed physician
- Reasonable changes
- Provided at no extra cost
- Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) common

Examples may include:

- Cerebral Palsy
- Diabetes
- Food Anaphylaxis (severe food allergy)

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The Licensed Physician's Statement for Disabilities

Before any changes can be made to a school meal to accommodate a child's disability, the school nutrition program needs to have specific written information from the child's physician. This information may be provided in a written statement or the school system may provide a form that can be used. The **Physician Statement for Disabilities** shows the information needed.

Working together as a team is the best way to meet your child's special nutrition needs. Be sure to include the school nutrition staff in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and other team meetings for your child. Your school nutrition program staff is ready to help your child!

Remember! If the licensed physician makes any changes to your child's diet orders, the school nutrition program needs a copy *in writing* as soon as possible.

Physician Statement for Disabilities

1. Have a licensed physician describe the following:
 - Your child's disability.
 - How the disability affects a major life activity.
 - How the disability restricts your child's diet.
 - The food(s) to remove from the diet.
 - The food(s) to add to the diet.
2. Return the signed information to the school nutrition program as soon as possible.

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Special Nutrition Needs for Health Concerns not Considered Disabilities

Your school nutrition staff works hard to meet the needs of all students. They see all children as special.

When a student has special nutrition needs, but does not have a disability, the school nutrition program determines meal changes on a case-by-case basis.

Any changes the school nutrition program can make are based on a student's medical needs. These needs are noted by written information from a recognized medical authority (physician, physician assistant, nurse practitioner, or other professionals specified by the State agency).

School nutrition programs do not charge an extra fee for the changes. School nutrition programs make reasonable changes to meals based on the written medical information provided, not food preferences. Families can provide special products to school nutrition programs to help meet a student's needs.



Special Nutrition Needs for Other Health Concerns

“The school nutrition program is encouraged, but not required, to provide food substitutions or modifications for children who have special medical or dietary needs, but are not considered to have a disability.” (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2001).

Meal changes for children with medically certified special dietary needs who are unable to eat regular meals as prepared must follow a process.

A recognized medical authority must identify your student's special dietary needs and the meal changes required.

This signed information needs to be on file before any changes can be made.

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Special Nutrition Needs for Health Concerns not Considered Disabilities, continued

Team Up with School Nutrition

Sometimes changes in meals are part of a student's health plan involving other school staff.

Make sure the school nutrition staff is included in your child's team meetings. When the school nutrition staff takes part in the meetings, they can help plan ways to meet your child's needs.

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The Medical Statement for Health Concerns not Considered Disabilities

If your child has a special nutrition need, but is not considered disabled, work with your school nutrition program. Programs can often meet these special nutrition needs.

School nutrition programs must follow federal rules. By law, before any meal changes can be made, the school nutrition program needs a signed statement on file from a recognized medical authority. Your school system may provide a form that can be used for this purpose.

Medical Statement for Special Nutrition Needs

Follow these steps to request changes to school meals that are not based on a disability:

1. Have a recognized medical authority provide the following information:
 - Your child's medical condition
 - How the medical condition restricts your child's diet
 - The food(s) to remove from the diet
 - The food(s) to add to the diet
2. Return the signed statement to your school nutrition program. Changes that can be made will be decided on a case-by-case basis.



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The Medical Statement for Health Concerns not Considered Disabilities, continued

Recognized Medical Authorities

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Remember! If any changes are made to your child's diet orders, the school nutrition program needs a copy *in writing* as soon as possible.

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Temporary Disabilities

Sometimes a child has a disability for a short period of time. An injury or medical treatment may result in a special nutrition need. For example, when a child has a wired jaw and cannot chew foods, this student has a temporary disability.

It does not matter whether a child has a disability that is temporary or a life condition, the same process guides the changes. A signed statement from a licensed physician must be on file before the school nutrition program can make any changes to a student's meals.

1. Have a licensed physician describe the following:
 - Your child's disability.
 - How the disability affects a major life activity.
 - How the disability restricts your child's diet.
 - The food(s) to remove from the diet.
 - The food(s) to add to the diet.
2. Return the signed statement to the school nutrition program as soon as possible.



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Often temporary disabilities involve changes to food textures. These changes help your child eat meals more easily. The physician's statement gives details on the type of changes your child requires. Specific instructions help the school nutrition program meet needs.

Written orders from the licensed physician are needed for any changes, including when texture changes are no longer needed. The school nutrition staff cannot make any changes to a child's special needs meals without written orders. A second written physician statement is needed to change the first special nutrition request. Be ready to follow this important step when your child no longer has special needs.

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