

GRAB AND GO LESSON

Nutritional Benefits of the Meal Pattern

Compliance | CACFP Meal Pattern

Purpose: This handout provides the nutritional benefits of each CACFP meal component.

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) meal patterns feature five meal components: fluid milk, vegetables, fruits, grains, and meats/meat alternates. These meal components make up nutritious meals and snacks. Following the meal pattern requirements will help you plan and serve well-balanced meals that help to meet the nutrient and energy needs of the children in your care.

The Meal Components

Fluid Milk

Fluid milk provides calcium, riboflavin, vitamins A and D, phosphorus, protein, and other nutrients. These nutrients help to build and maintain strong bones, muscles, and even teeth.

As part of a reimbursable meal, serve one-year-olds whole milk. You may be wondering why whole milk? Infants tend to need the protein and the fat found in whole milk for healthy growth and development.

When children turn two years old, serve unflavored low-fat (1%) or unflavored fat-free milk (skim). At this age, they tend to need the protein, but not the fat found in whole milk. Low-fat and fat-free milk generally has the same amount of protein as whole milk.

Meats/Meat Alternates

Meats/meat alternates provide protein, iron, B vitamins (thiamin, riboflavin, niacin), and other nutrients. This group includes meats, poultry, fish, eggs, cheese, tofu, beans, peas, lentils, yogurt, nuts, seeds, peanut butter, and other nut butters. The protein found in these foods serves as the building blocks for muscles, bones, skin, and blood.

Vegetables and Fruits

Vegetables and fruits provide vitamins A and C, potassium, and carbohydrates. Foods in these groups are good sources of fiber and can be served raw or cooked. Eating a variety of fresh produce contributes to good health because it reduces the risk of chronic illnesses later in life.

Grains

Grains are good sources of complex carbohydrates that provide fiber, iron, and some B vitamins (thiamin, riboflavin, niacin). Not only do these nutrient sources reduce the risk of chronic illnesses, but they also promote a healthy digestive system.

This group includes whole-grain or enriched breads, cereals, pasta, and bread products such as waffles, muffins, and crackers. The term whole-grain-rich is associated with the grain component.

The term “whole grain-rich” means the grain content of a product is between 50-100% whole grain, with any remaining grains being enriched. When you serve products that are whole-grain-rich, you help children to get

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the best source of nutrients found in grains.

Foods That Count

Check with your State agency or sponsor for current information on the foods that credit as part of a reimbursable meal. These items will provide children with the nutrients they need for healthy growth and development.

You may choose to serve non-creditable foods as additional food, but these items may not be claimed as part of a reimbursable meal. Some examples of non-creditable foods are grain-based desserts, such as cakes, cookies, or brownies. Other items may include ice cream or pudding or salty, high-fat snack foods, such as potato chips. Care should be taken when adding non-creditable foods in your menus since they often contain hidden fat, salt, and sugar. Many of these foods are those that the Dietary Guidelines for Americans suggests should be used less often.

The nutrient needs of children differ because of individual body size, growth pattern, and activity level. Variations and serving sizes in the components of the meal pattern are based on these differences. The amounts required in the meal pattern are minimum requirements that must be served. However, some children may need larger servings than the requirements.

References

U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2017). *Choose MyPlate*. www.choosemyplate.gov/MyPlate

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2024). *Final Rule - Child Nutrition Programs: Meal patterns consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fr-042524>

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