

# GRAB AND GO LESSON

## CACFP Meal Component Basics

Compliance | CACFP Meal Pattern

**Purpose:** This handout provides requirements for each of the five meal components for child meals.

The meal patterns for the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) help to make menu planning easier. Use them to plan well-balanced meals that meet children's nutrient and energy needs.

The meal pattern has three features:

- Groups food into five components
- Lists the components to serve at each meal and snack
- Specifies the minimum serving sizes for each component based on age ranges

### The Meal Components

The CACFP meal patterns are based on five meal components or groups of food. These meal components are fluid milk, vegetables, fruits, grains, and meats/meat alternates.

#### Fluid Milk

Only fluid milk can be served to meet this component requirement.

- Serve expressed breast milk or allow mothers to breastfeed their infants on-site to children of any age.
- Serve unflavored whole milk to children aged 1.
- Serve children 2–5 years, unflavored low-fat (1%), or unflavored fat-free (skim) milk.
- Serve children six and older unflavored low-fat (1%), unflavored fat-free (skim), or fat-free flavored milk.
- A one-month transition period is allowed to switch from whole milk to low-fat or fat-free milk when a child turns two years old. Meals served to children 24–25 months old that contain whole or reduced-fat (2%) milk may be claimed for reimbursement.
- Choose from low-fat or fat-free milk, fat-free or low-fat lactose-reduced milk, fat-free or low-fat lactose-free milk, fat-free or low-fat buttermilk, or fat-free or low-fat acidified milk.
- Milk must be pasteurized and meet the State and local standards.

#### Vegetables

- Vegetables may be served fresh, frozen, canned, dried, or 100% pasteurized vegetable juice.
- Pasteurized, full-strength, 100% vegetable juice (or fruit juice) may be served at only one meal, including snacks, per day.
- Cooked dry beans, peas, and lentils may credit as either a vegetable or as a meat alternate but not as both in the same meal.
- A vegetable may be used to meet the entire fruits component at lunch and supper. When two vegetables are served at lunch or supper, two different types of vegetables must be served.
- When crediting vegetables, they are credited based on volume, except 1 cup raw leafy greens credits as ½ cup vegetable.

#### Fruits

- Fruits may be served fresh, frozen, canned, dried, or as 100% pasteurized juice.
- Pasteurized, full-strength, 100% fruit juice (or vegetable juice) may be served at one meal, including snack meals, per day.
- When crediting fruits, they are credited based on volume, except ¼ cup of dried fruit counts as ½ cup of fruit.

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### Grains

- All grains served must be whole grain-rich, enriched, or fortified.
- At least one serving of grains per day must be whole grain-rich. Whole grain-rich foods are those that contain between 50 and 100 percent whole grain, with any remaining grains being enriched.
- Breakfast cereals include ready-to-eat, instant, and regular hot cereals. Through September 30, 2025, breakfast cereals must contain no more than 6 grams of total sugars per dry ounce. By October 1, 2025, breakfast cereals must contain no more than 6 grams of added sugars per dry ounce.
- Grain-based desserts do not count toward the grains component. Some examples of grain-based desserts include cakes, cookies, and brownies.

### Meats/Meat Alternates

- Meat options include lean meat, poultry, or fish. Meat alternates include cheese, eggs, beans, peas, lentils, yogurt, and nut butters. Both types can be used to meet all or a portion of the meats/meat alternates component.
- The creditable quantity of meats/meat alternates must be the edible portion.
- Commercial tofu may be used to meet all or part of the meats/meat alternates component following FNS guidance. Non-commercial and non-standardized tofu is not creditable. Commercial tofu must contain 5 grams of protein per 2.2 ounces ( $\frac{1}{4}$  cup) to equal 1 ounce of the meat/meat alternate.
- Yogurt may be regular or soy, plain or flavored, unsweetened or sweetened. Through September 30, 2025, yogurt must contain no more than 23 grams of total sugars per 6 ounces. By October 1, 2025, yogurt must contain no more than 12 grams of added sugars per 6 ounces (2 grams of added sugars per ounce).

### References

Institute of Child Nutrition. (2019). *CACFP meal pattern requirements training*. University, MS: Author.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2020). *Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP): Nutrition standards for CACFP meals and snacks*. [www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp/meals-and-snacks](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp/meals-and-snacks)

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*.

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