

Cycle Menus

Resource: Fact Sheet

Topic Area: Nutrition and Meal Management

Subtopic Area: Nutrition Needs

Introduction

A cycle menu is a series of menus planned for a period, such as four or six weeks. The menu is different each day during the cycle. After serving the entire menu, the cycle is complete, and it repeats in the same order.

There are many benefits to using cycle menus. Some examples include saving time, helping to avoid repetitive tasks, reducing labor costs, and reducing waste. Cycle menus also allow for substitutions during special occasions or special dietary needs. Consider incorporating cycle menus into your program to enhance the overall quality of meals and snacks.

Application

- Locate a copy of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) meal pattern requirements.
- Gather your recipes.
- Decide the number of weeks for the cycle.
- Choose the main dish, usually the meat/meat alternate, first. Then, plan the other food components (vegetable, fruit, grain, and milk).
- Confirm the menus meet all of the CACFP meal pattern requirements for a reimbursable meal or snack.

Tips for Using Cycle Menus

- Plan a different main dish for each day in the cycle, alternating between types of meats.
- Vary the preparation methods to avoid overloading/overworking kitchen equipment.
- Include in-season foods.
- Balance higher-cost foods with lower-cost foods.
- Include raw and cooked vegetables.
- Include a variety of foods so children get a wide range of nutrients.
- Try some new recipes along with the standard ones.
- Remember that cycle menus can be adjusted to allow for holidays, unexpected leftovers, or seasonal produce.
- Consider the arrival date and shelf life of fresh foods and store them properly to reduce waste.

- Consider delivery times and storage capacities of freezers and refrigerators.
- Think about the children's likes and dislikes. Remember, it can take up to 10–15 times before children try or like new foods.
- Include different shapes, colors, textures, temperatures, and flavors for added appeal.

Reference

Institute of Child Nutrition. (2013). *Planning cycle menus for child care*. University, MS: Author.

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