



WRITING SPECIFICATIONS THAT LIMIT SODIUM

Prior to planning menus for your school nutrition program, it is important to write specifications that clearly identify the products and the nutrition standards for sodium that you want to purchase from distributors and/or manufacturers. Understanding the different methods to write a nutrition standard for sodium within a product specification—and when to use them—allows you to procure products that achieve menus below the weekly sodium limits.

PRODUCT SPECIFICATIONS FOR USE IN A COMPETITIVE PROCUREMENT PROCESS

A **specification** is a description of the *characteristics* you are seeking in a food product.

The product type determines the characteristics to include in a specification, including if it *requires* or *should include* a **nutrition standard**. Examples of product types include:

- Fresh produce
- Milk
- Fresh meat, poultry, and fish
- Commercially processed, packaged, and prepared foods*

Nutrition standards are required for certain products, such as:

- Milk [must be fortified with vitamins A and D, fat-free (skim), or low-fat (1%)]* and
- Grains [must be whole grain-rich or enriched].

Including nutrition standards in the product specifications of foods can help you meet the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) dietary specifications, which **limit** calories, sodium, and the percentage of calories from saturated fat.**

*Flavored milk, breakfast cereals, and yogurt will have an added sugars nutrition standard beginning July 1, 2025.

**A limit on the percentage of calories from added sugars must be implemented by July 1, 2027.



Examples of Specification Characteristics

Product name
Product description
 Type
 Cut, shape
 Portion size
 Precooked weight
 Frozen, fresh, or dry
Brand name
 Manufacturer's name, description, code number, pack size
 "Pre-approved equal" wording
Case pack and weight
Main ingredients
Other product ingredients
Prohibited ingredients
 For example, food additives, artificial colors and flavors, food allergens
Minimum and maximum sizes and pieces
Unit on which award is made
Quality indicators
 Standards of Identity (SOIs)
 USDA Grades and Standards
Meal pattern equivalents
 Child Nutrition (CN) label
 Product Formulation Statement (PFS)
Nutrition standards
 For example, limits on calories, sodium, saturated fat; milk vitamin fortification and fat content; zero grams added *trans* fats
Buy American

*The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) defines "[commercially processed, packaged, and prepared foods](#)" as "processed multiple-ingredient foods that have been packaged for direct sale to consumers, for use in food establishments including, but not limited to, restaurants or for resale to other members of the food industry, as well as foods that are prepared by food establishments for direct consumption."

The product type also determines *which* nutrition standards to address in your product specifications. Consider including a nutrition standard to limit **sodium** in specifications for commercially processed, packaged, and prepared foods such as:

- Bread products
- Canned vegetables and legumes
- Condiments
- Heat-and-serve entrées
- Potato products
- Processed meats*
- Tomato-based products
- Seasoned/flavored vegetables

*The [Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020—2025](#) considers processed meats to include hot dogs, sausages, ham, and luncheon meats.

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There are three different approaches to writing sodium nutrition standards within your product specifications:

Sodium Nutrient Claims

Lower-sodium versions of products—primarily canned/bottled goods and some frozen goods—are often labeled with U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) sodium nutrient claims such as “Low Sodium,” “Reduced Sodium,” or “No Salt Added.” These products *may* offer lower-sodium versions of the food products you currently use. You can use these claims as your nutrition standard for sodium within a specification.

ICN’s [Sodium Swaps: Utilizing Product Substitution](#) worksheet provides more information on FDA sodium nutrient claims.

Comparing Low Sodium Nutrient Claims

It’s important to note that one brand’s “Low Sodium” product may be higher or lower in sodium than another brand’s product labeled “Low Sodium.” As long as both brands’ products are equal to or less than 140 mg sodium per serving, they can both use the nutrient claim “Low Sodium.” Keep in mind these possible sodium amount differences when comparing similar sodium nutrient claims between brands. For example, depending on the popularity of the product and the frequency in which it is used, offering a low-sodium product with 100 mg sodium per serving versus 140 mg sodium per serving can make a difference in your menu’s weekly sodium total. Use the Nutrition Facts label to compare the milligrams of sodium per serving (and the serving size) across commercial brands to identify which products are lower in sodium.

Smart Snacks Compliant

Similar to using a sodium nutrient claim, indicating “Smart Snacks compliant” in the specification is another method to limit sodium—it will also limit the total calories, saturated fat, *trans* fats, and added sugars in a product. “Smart Snacks” entrées and side items are limited to ≤ 480 mg and ≤ 200 mg of sodium per item, respectively. Please refer to USDA’s [A Guide to Smart Snacks in Schools](#) for more detailed information on Smart Snacks.

Maximum Sodium Limit

When products do not qualify for or are not labeled with a sodium nutrient claim, OR when you want to procure a product that falls at or below a specific sodium amount, it’s best to include a maximum sodium limit as the nutrition standard within the specification. Determining the sodium limit requires product and menu analysis. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) [Guidance for Industry: Voluntary Sodium Reduction Goals](#) may prove helpful in determining maximum sodium limits for certain products. Once you know your limit, you can insert it within the specification with variations of the following terms:

Refer to ICN’s [Working With Your Procurement Partners](#) worksheet for more information about procuring lower-sodium products.

“No more than,” “May not exceed,” or “A maximum limit of”
XYZ mg of sodium per serving

EXAMPLES OF PRODUCT SPECIFICATIONS THAT LIMIT SODIUM

Writing specifications is an important aspect of the procurement process. Below are examples of *partially* written product specifications for use in formal or informal procurement documents.* They demonstrate how to limit sodium using the three different approaches previously described.

USE SODIUM NUTRIENT CLAIMS

GREEN BEANS, Cut, Canned, Grade B or better, **Low sodium**.

CARROTS, Diced, Frozen, Grade A, **No salt added**.



REQUIRE PRODUCTS TO MEET SMART SNACKS REQUIREMENTS

BAGEL, BLUEBERRY, Sliced. First and primary ingredient must be whole grain. The product must contain at least 50% whole grain content. **Smart Snacks compliant** (2.00 oz. equivalent Grains). Product Formulation Statement preferred.

GRANOLA, CINNAMON, Individually wrapped. First and primary ingredient must be whole grain. The product must contain at least 50% whole grain content. **Smart Snacks compliant** (1.00 oz. equivalent Grains). Product Formulation Statement preferred.

DEFINE MAXIMUM SODIUM LIMIT

BURRITO, BEAN & CHEESE, Fully cooked, IQF. Pinto and black bean burrito on a whole grain-rich tortilla. Cannot contain beef, poultry, pork, or fish by-products or MSG. Must contain between 300–350 calories, less than 10% calories from saturated fat, zero trans fat, and **may not exceed 500 mg of sodium per individual portion** (1.00 oz. equivalent M/MA, 1.50 oz. equivalent Grains). CN label or Product Formulation Statement required.

CHICKEN NUGGETS, Breaded, Fully cooked, IQF. **Maximum limit of 400 mg of sodium per 5 piece portion** (2.00 oz. equivalent M/MA, 1.00 oz. equivalent Grains). CN label or Product Formulation Statement required.

PIZZA, CHEESE, Sliced, Frozen. Whole grain crust, 100% real cheese (no imitation). **No more than 500 mg of sodium per portion slice** (2.00 oz. equivalent M/MA, 2.00 oz. equivalent Grains, 1/8 cup R/O Veg). CN label or Product Formulation Statement required.



POTATOES, FRENCH FRIES, Seasoned, Frozen, Ovenable, 1/2" Crinkle cut, Low moisture, U.S. Grade A. Processed in vegetable oil. **No more than 200 mg of sodium per 1/2 cup serving**.

TOMATO, SAUCE, Marinara, Dipping cups. No HFCS. **May not exceed 200 mg of sodium/2.5 oz individual portion cup**. Minimum 9 months shelf life from production.

TORTILLA, FLOUR, 8", Whole grain-rich. **Maximum limit of 225 mg of sodium per portion** (1.50 oz. equivalent Grains). Product Formulation Statement preferred.

**These examples are not intended to endorse desired sodium limits for certain types of products. Lower-sodium versions of some products are available.*

WRITING NUTRITION STANDARDS THAT LIMIT SODIUM

Now it's your turn to consider sodium nutrition standards for the higher-sodium products used in your menu. In the table below, list one product from your menu that fits within each category and review the specification used in your competitive procurement process. Then, write a new sodium nutrition standard you could incorporate into the specification the next time you are ready to competitively procure the product. Learn more about the market research and other steps needed to specify a maximum sodium limit in ICN's [Working With Your Procurement Partners](#) worksheet.

Names of Products	Sodium Nutrition Standard
<i>Bread product</i>	
<i>Canned vegetable or legume</i>	
<i>Condiment</i>	
<i>Flavored/seasoned vegetables</i>	
<i>Heat-and-serve entrée</i>	
<i>Potato product</i>	
<i>Processed meat</i>	
<i>Tomato-based product</i>	

Including nutrition standards that limit sodium in your written specifications is a strategy that will help you procure lower-sodium products.