



# Healthy school lunches

## for pupils in nursery schools/units

Guidance for **school caterers** on implementing  
national nutritional standards

# Contents

1. Introduction	page 2	
2. What is a healthy diet?	page 2	
3. National nutritional standards for school lunches	page 3	
4. Good catering practice	page 4	
5. Monitoring the nutritional standards	page 10	
6. Ideas for improving the service	page 11	
Annex A	- Special dietary requirements	page 12
Annex B	- Sources of calcium, folate, zinc and iron	page 14
Annex C	- Example of a self-monitoring checklist	page 17

# 1. Introduction

Good health is important for everyone. The Government wants to secure, maintain and improve children's and young people's health. One of the ways it is doing that is by setting minimum national nutritional standards for lunches for pupils in schools.

This guidance is primarily for use by school **caterers** but will also be of interest to school governors and headteachers.

Setting the new nutritional standards represents just one of a number of initiatives, for example "Healthy Schools", aimed at improving children's health.

A varied and balanced diet is an important way of protecting health, and promoting proper growth and development. **In the short term it can help children and young people to improve their concentration and fulfil their potential both inside and outside school.** It helps to minimise some health risks such as anaemia and dental decay. A good diet in childhood can also help to prevent ill health later in life. Unhealthy diets, which include too many fatty foods, too much salt, and not enough vegetables and fruit, are linked to the risk of heart disease, stroke and some cancers. The National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) published in June 2000 highlighted deficiencies in young people's diets and these are addressed in this guidance.

## This document:

- Tells you about the national nutritional standards for lunches in nursery schools and units in section 3. **The standards are compulsory from 1 April 2001.**
- Gives good practice guidance in section 4 outlining practical steps for meeting the new minimum nutritional standards.

# 2. What is a healthy diet?

There are no healthy or unhealthy foods, only healthy or unhealthy diets. For children aged five and under a healthy diet means broadly:

- a balanced diet with plenty of variety
- a diet which provides enough energy for satisfactory growth and development
- plenty of fruit and vegetables
- plenty of iron rich foods
- plenty of calcium rich foods
- not having sugary foods and drinks too often.

**A list of foods which are particularly high in folates, iron, calcium and also zinc is set out at the back of this guidance at Annex B.**

Many children today consume too much fat and have sugary foods and drinks too often. A few do not get the right amounts of vitamins and essential minerals. Like the adult population children are getting fatter. Children in this age group should be in the process of adopting adult eating patterns and will be at different stages. In broad terms a healthy diet for them means food which provides plenty of energy and the nutrients they need for proper growth and development. They should be encouraged to eat something from each food group and to try new foods.

### 3. National nutritional standards for school lunches

This chapter sets out compulsory nutritional standards, which are set out in legislation.

These are **minimum standards**. If your Local Education Authority or school has set higher nutritional standards, you should meet those.

#### What are the compulsory standards?

The standards say that for lunches for children in nursery schools or units, there must be available every day at least **one** item from each of the following food groups:

- starchy foods such as bread, potatoes, rice and pasta.
- fruit and vegetables.
- milk and dairy foods.
- meat, fish and other non-dairy sources of protein.

#### What do national nutritional standards apply to?

- all lunches provided for children during term time, **whether they are free or lunches which children pay for**. Children cannot spend their entitlement on other school food such as breakfast or break-time snacks.
- Children are eligible for free school meals by virtue of their parents receiving specific support payments. **However, an additional requirement must be satisfied by children who are receiving education that is suitable for a child under compulsory school age. These children must receive education both before and after the lunch period, before being eligible for a free school lunch.**

Information on eligibility for a free school lunch can be viewed on the website:

<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/atoz/m/mealsandmilk/>

- **hot and cold food**, including packed lunches provided by the school for pupils on school trips.

## Additional recommendations

Although these are not in the Regulations, the Secretary of State:

- **expects that drinking water should be available to all children every day, free of charge, and;**
- **strongly recommends that schools should offer some hot food, particularly in the Winter months.** A school lunch does not have to be a hot meal. However, a hot meal can be a useful morale-booster during the colder months. Parents often prefer to buy a hot meal for their children and see it as offering added value;
- **strongly recommends that drinking milk is available as an option every day.**

## 4. Good catering practice

This chapter offers guidance on good practice, but which is not required by law. Following this guidance is a practical way of meeting the new minimum nutritional standards, while meeting the needs of customers.

### Key points to bear in mind

- Reflect the likes and dislikes of children.
- Work with the school, for example, with teachers to re-inforce healthy eating messages at lunch time and in the classroom.
- Encourage children to have a balanced diet.
- Aim to offer a variety of food over the week. Make changes gradually.
- Avoid over cooking food and keeping it hot too long before serving.

Use a variety of cooking methods:

steaming	braising	blanching	simmering	boiling	stewing
poaching	casseroles	baking	grilling	barbecuing	
roasting with no fat or oil on a rack					

**It is important to use cooking methods that lead to minimum destruction of nutrients, for example, over cooking of vegetables can lead to a loss of important nutrients.**

## Planning your menu

### Bread, other cereals and potatoes

This group includes bread, potatoes, pasta, rice, cereals, yams, sweet potatoes and noodles. Starchy foods provide energy, fibre, vitamins and minerals. Offer a variety of these foods over a week.

#### Rice

- White, whole grain or flavoured rice can be served hot, or cold as part of a salad.
- Rice pudding made with whole milk is a dessert option.

### Potatoes, sweet potatoes and yams

Points worth remembering when frying potatoes:

- large pieces of potato, thick or straight cut chips, absorb less fat than thin or crinkle cut chips.
  - try to use a frying fat or oil which contains not more than 20% saturated fat
  - have the oil at the correct temperature, change it regularly and drain it off well
- 
- Boil potatoes in the minimum amount of water and for the shortest amount of time to retain vitamins.
  - "Spray" oil rather than sitting potatoes in fat or oil, or flash fry cut potatoes and then roast them in the oven without adding further fat.
  - Use herbs or other shredded vegetables to add colour and flavour to baked potatoes.

#### Bread

- Try a variety of bread, rolls and crispbreads, including wholewheat.
- Include a variety of options as fillings for rolls and sandwiches.

#### Cereals

- Some breakfast cereals are fortified with nutrients such as iron and folic acid. The iron in these foods is absorbed better if they are consumed with a source of vitamin C such as fruit juice.

#### Pasta

- Serve plenty of pasta and try serving different varieties, including wholemeal, shapes and colours, and serve cold in salads.
- Use tomato-based, as a change from cheese-based sauces.

## Allergies to wheat, oats, barley and rye

If you have children who are allergic to wheat products, good alternatives are foods made from maize (eg polenta), rice, rice flour, potatoes, potato flour, buckwheat, sago, tapioca, soya and soya flour. Coeliacs cannot eat foods containing wheat, oats, barley or rye.

## Fruit and vegetables

**It is important to get children into the habit of eating foods which are rich in folates. A list is at the back of this guidance at Annex A.**

- People should have five servings of fruit and vegetables a day.
- Fruit and vegetables can be fresh, frozen, dried, canned, or in juice form.

## Vegetables

**Steaming or cooking vegetables with minimal amounts of water, and serving as soon after cooking as possible, helps to retain nutrients. Long cooking times and keeping vegetables warm for long periods before serving, will lead to heavy loss of some nutrients.**

- Offer a wide variety of vegetables.
- Try incorporating vegetables into meat dishes such as casseroles, lasagne and shepherd's pie.
- **Spaghetti hoops and other canned pasta in tomato sauce should not be served as a vegetable**, but counted as part of the starchy food group.
- Try not to rely too heavily on baked beans as a vegetable, as they do not contain vitamin C.

## Salads

- Try offering a choice and use a combination of traditional salads and raw vegetables, fruit and nuts (See allergies at annex A) to vary the taste, colour and texture.

## Fruit

- Offer a variety of fruit and juices.
- Offer a selection of fresh fruits, attractively presented, as a dessert. Include fruits in desserts. Ready to eat small portions are often more attractive to young children.
- Provide canned fruit in natural juice or light syrup rather than in heavy syrup.
- Offer unsweetened fruit juice as a drink option.
- Dried fruit is good source of iron.

## Milk and dairy products

- Milk and dairy products are an excellent source of calcium, which is important for good bone development.

### Milk

Skimmed milk is not suitable as a main drink for the under fives. Whole or semi-skimmed milk should be used for this age group. Any milk provided must be free of charge to pupils entitled to a free school lunch.

### Cheese

- Cheese is a popular choice for sandwiches. Offer a range which includes lower fat versions like half-fat Cheddar, Edam and cottage cheese. Hard cheese is a good source of zinc.
- Consider how much cheese you are using over a week to see if it needs to be reduced.
- Do not rely too much on cheese as the main protein item (for example for vegetarians). Try not to serve it more than once a week as the only vegetarian option.

### Yoghurt

- Fromage frais and Quark also come into this food group
- Plain yoghurt can be used as a salad dressing and in soups and sauces.
- Frozen yoghurt is a good alternative to ice cream.

## Dairy-free diets

Some people cannot digest milk and other dairy products. As an alternative to milk, serve soya drinks fortified with calcium.

## Meat, fish and alternative sources of protein

**Meat, fish and alternatives such as beans and pulses are a major source of protein. Red meat is also an important source of zinc and contains vitamin D.**

- Offer a variety of meat and fish dishes.
- In some dishes meat and fish can be extended by using more pulses or vegetables.

## Meat and fish

- Try to select the leanest cuts of meat you can afford and trim off any visible fat and take the skin off chicken.
- Alternatives to sealing meat in fat are, baking it on a rack or trivet, sealing it in a small amount of hot stock or soya sauce, dry frying or basting it in its own juices.
- Drain or skim the fat from casseroles and mince wherever possible.
- Steaming or poaching fish reduces fat content.
- If you do fry, ensure that clean oil is used at the correct temperature to minimise absorption.
- Drain food well and change the fat regularly. Larger pieces of fish and meat absorb less fat.
- **It is strongly recommended that servings of fish should include oily fish, such as sardines and mackerel which contain a type of fat beneficial to health.**
- You may want to look at "quality assurance" standards for meat products.

## Beans and pulses

- Offer dishes made with beans and pulses (for example kidney beans, baked beans, butter beans) on the menu cycle: they are popular with meat eaters as well as vegetarians.
- Beans, lentils, chickpeas and peanut butter are sources of protein and fibre and can be used to extend meat and fish dishes.

## Nuts

- Nuts are good sources of protein, fibre, iron and calcium and unsalted nuts are low in sodium. But moderate amounts should be used, as they are high in fat. Most nuts are low in saturated fat and high in mono- or polyunsaturated fats.
- **It is preferable to serve nuts as nut butters. Small children may choke on nuts. Some children may have severe allergic reaction to nuts or products containing nuts. For advice see Annex A.**

## Eggs

- Eggs contain protein and several vitamins and minerals. Contrary to popular belief, eggs are not good sources of iron, since the iron they contain is poorly absorbed by the body.
- Try to incorporate eggs into the foods you offer, in a variety of ways. However, it is best not to serve them too frequently as a vegetarian option. Eggs should be cooked thoroughly for young children until both the yolk and white are solid to avoid the risk of food poisoning.

## Foods containing fat and foods containing sugar

This group is not essential for health, but adds to our enjoyment of food.

- Try to be sparing with fats. Aim to keep the proportion of foods in this group to no more than about one tenth of the total food on offer over the course of a week.
- Try not to offer more than one fried item a day.

## Fats and oils

- Use monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats wherever possible for cooking, spreading and in dressings. Saturated fats include hard margarines, lard, suet and coconut oil. Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats include maize, corn, safflower, sunflower, soya, rapeseed, olive oils and spreads made from these oils.
- Try not to serve pastry dishes too often.
- Thicken sauces by reducing the cooking liquid and adding potato flour (fecule) to give a quality end product. Sauces in casseroles and meat dishes can also be thickened with lentils or split peas.
- Ice cream can be high in fat. Try not to serve ice cream as a dessert too often. Try non-dairy ice cream as an alternative.

## Sugar

- When preparing desserts, offer a range of puddings which are lower in sugar.
- Fresh, tinned and dried fruit can be incorporated into puddings. Dried fruit provides extra fibre.
- Offer milk as well as unsweetened fruit juices, soft drinks and diet drinks. Soft drinks containing saccharin should be well diluted for children of this age **more than for an adult**.

## Salt

The body's need for salt (sodium) is low and a high salt intake can be linked to the development of disease. Try cutting down the amount of salt used in cooking gradually so that it is not noticed. Herbs, onions, celery, garlic powders, and lemon juice can all enhance the flavour of foods. Offer fewer of the foods which tend to be high in sodium, for example savoury snack foods, packet soups, and sauces. Dried meat products can be high in salt.

## 5. Monitoring nutritional standards

Monitoring what your customers are eating is essential to your business and to their health. The ultimate responsibility for ensuring that national nutritional standards are met rests with the Local Education Authority or, if they have delegated the budget for school meals, with the school governing body.

Regular monitoring by caterers of school lunches is also essential for confirming that you are :

- meeting compulsory national nutritional standards and other contractual requirements
- giving children the nutrients they need for proper growth and development, and
- keeping your customers happy.

Monitoring can help identify where improvements can be made and provide a framework for taking action.

The Government recommends that caterers keep records of the food provided:

- to check that they are meeting national nutritional standards every day.
- to see what items are being eaten. For example, some foods running out too early? Are some dishes always left over? What foods are not being eaten?
- as a record of whether you are implementing healthier catering practices.

You can monitor performance by using a checklist. **An example of a self monitoring checklist is at the back of this guidance at Annex C.**

**Schools, Local Education Authorities and caterers are also encouraged to undertake more detailed monitoring.**

### Nutrient analysis

Using a checklist is fine for everyday monitoring of national nutritional standards. But even if you prepare food according to the manufacturer's instructions or follow a recipe closely, you cannot be sure of the nutrient level in the food without a breakdown of the final dish. "Eating well for the under 5's in child care" gives useful information on nutrients needed by under 5's. It is published by the Caroline Walker Trust (CWT) at 22 Kindersley Way, Abbots Langley, Herts, WD5 0DQ and costs £12.95. The CWT also produce a computer package called "Chomp" on menu planning for children under 5 in care. Although the package is not intended for "whole day" menu planning you may find it helpful.

## 6. Ideas for improving the service

### Delegated budgets

Primary schools now have the option to have delegated budgets for school meal provision. This will include children under five who are registered at primary schools. Delegation provides an **ideal opportunity** for caterers to work with individual schools to build a tailor made meals service to meet a school's particular needs.

In any case, caterers can work with schools to improve the school meals service. Some ideas are set out below.

### Modernising the image of school meals

Use bright and innovative marketing techniques.

### Pricing

To encourage children to eat a healthy balanced diet, offer a balanced meal at an attractive price. **The Secretary of State strongly recommends that a standard two course lunch and drink should be on offer for pupils, particularly as it forms the main meal of the day for some. The Secretary of State also recommends that the value of a free school meal should be set to enable eligible children to have a standard two course lunch and a drink.**

### Improving the food

Keep the menu interesting and vary foods, colours, textures and flavours.

Keep an eye on what children are eating. If there are unpopular items, replace them.

Ensure hot food looks and stays hot.

Investigate new products.

### Promoting healthy eating

Help and encourage children to select balanced food choices, if a completely set meal menu is not in operation.

### Promoting school meals

Working with the school you could provide sample meals for parents evenings, or invite parents to come to school for lunch.

Introduce theme days eg linked to classroom activities or festivals, competitions and prizes.

Take part in national promotions or local promotions for example LACA National School Meals Week and School Cook of the Year, LACA Mark of Distinction, food awareness week.

# Annex A - Special dietary requirements

## Special diets for customers from religious and ethnic groups

Hindus	No beef	Mostly vegetarian; fish rarely eaten	Period of fasting common
Jews	No pork	Meat must be kosher. Only fish with fins and scales eaten	Meat and dairy foods must not be consumed together
Muslims	No pork	Meat must be halal; no shellfish	Regular fasting, including Ramadan
Rastafarians	No animal products except milk	Foods must be I-tal or alive, so no canned or processed food, no added salt, no coffee	Food should be organic
Sikhs	No beef	Meat must be killed by one blow to the head	

Be aware of the content of meat products. For example turkey burgers sometimes contain pork.

## Vegetarians

Many people are vegetarians. You should make every effort to offer a variety of vegetarian options.

## allergies

Food allergies are estimated to affect 1 or 2% of the adult population and are more prevalent in infants and children. The most common allergenic foods are eggs, milk, fish, shellfish, peanuts, soya, wheat, tree nuts and seeds. Allergies to certain foods, such as peanuts and peanut products, other nuts, seeds and their derivatives and shellfish can be particularly acute. People suffering from a severe food allergy need to know the exact ingredients in their food, because even a tiny amount of the allergenic food could kill them.

## How can you help?

- Make sure you know which children suffer from an allergy and to which food
- Make sure your staff are aware of the potential hazards from the use of severe allergens such as nuts and nut products in training sessions or notices.
- If you use severe allergens in a recipe find ways of passing information to those such as dinner nannies who supervise nursery children during lunch. This should be by clearly labelling it in words or symbols "contains nuts", making it clear from the name of the dish, or by oral communication. The school should ensure that that dinner nannies are aware of those children who may suffer severe allergic reactions to nuts or nut products.
- Remember also that any oil that has previously been used to cook products containing nuts can carry minute traces of nut proteins and thus have the same effect as nut oils.



- Beware of accidentally transferring food from one dish to another. Cooking equipment can be a means of cross-contaminating foods with peanut or nut protein. Allergy sufferers can react to the smallest amount of protein and even minute amounts transferred through cross contamination could cause a severe reaction.
- Ask the catering supplier to provide information as to whether the ingredients or flavourings used in their products contain nuts or seeds.
- If you prepare food check the complete recipes of all your products so you can answer questions if asked.
- Be clear about the school's policies regarding first aid and administering medication, and whether a member of staff has been trained to administer medication in the event of an allergic reaction by a child.  
**If you are in any doubt about the severity of a reaction, call an ambulance immediately.**

## ANNEX B

### Sources of calcium, folate, zinc and iron

#### Calcium

##### Good sources of calcium

- Hard cheeses, cheese spread, soya cheese,
- Canned sardines or salmon, drained and mashed up with the bones, fish paste
- Tofu (soya bean) steamed or spread
- Milk and yogurt
- Soya drink with added calcium
- Soya mince
- Ice cream
- Egg yolk
- Bread, (except wholemeal), crumpets, muffins, plain and cheese scones
- Beans, lentils, chickpeas
- Ready to eat or stewed figs

##### Provides some calcium

- Baked squash, sweetpotato
- Broccoli, dark green leafy vegetables, turnip, carrots, cabbage, peas
- Tomato puree
- Dates, sultanas, raisins, ready to eat or stewed apricots

#### Folate

##### Rich sources of folate/folic acid

- Fresh raw or cooked brussels sprouts, asparagus, spinach, cooked black eye beans
- Breakfast cereals (fortified with folic acid)
- Liver

## Other good sources of folate/folic acid

- Fresh, raw, frozen and cooked broccoli, spring greens, cabbage, green beans, cauliflower, peas, bean sprouts, okra, cooked soya beans, iceberg lettuce, parsnips, chick peas.
- Kidneys, yeast and beef extracts

## Zinc

### Good sources of zinc

- Lean beef, lamb, pork: roast, mince, burgers, liver
- Chicken or turkey: especially dark meat, liver
- Sausages
- Hard cheeses
- Eggs
- Tinned pilchards, sardines, tuna
- Brown and wholemeal bread
- Whole grain breakfast cereals
- Red kidney beans, chickpeas, lentils nuts

## Iron

### Good sources of iron which are well absorbed

- Canned sardines, pilchards, mackerel, tuna, shrimps, crab
- Liver pate and sausage, kidney, heart
- Lean beef, lamb, pork: roast, mince, burgers, liver
- Chicken or turkey: especially dark meat, liver
- Sausages, grilled
- Fish paste

**Other sources of iron ( If you add sources of vitamin C, or meat or fish to the following foods it will help the iron to be absorbed)**

- Breakfast cereals with added iron
- Breads
- Red kidney beans, haricot beans, pinto beans - boiled or canned
- Dahl, lentils, chickpeas - boiled or canned
- Baked beans, peas - raw, cooked, frozen or canned
- Tofu, creamed coconut
- Apricots, prunes, figs, peaches - ready to eat or stewed
- Raisins, sultanas
- Cauliflower, spring greens, broccoli, mixed vegetables

## ANNEX C

### Example of a self-monitoring checklist

#### Compulsory requirements

Is at least one item from each of the following food groups present on the daily menu and throughout the lunch service?

● bread, other cereals and potatoes

Yes/No

Action taken

● vegetables and fruit

Yes/No

Action taken

● milk and dairy foods

Yes/No

Action taken

● meat, fish and alternative sources of protein

Yes/No

Action taken

● Comments

#### Strong recommendation

● Is drinking water available free of charge every day?

Yes/No

Action taken

## Good practice

Does the menu cycle feature each week (See the list at the back of this guidance for a list of these foods)

● foods rich in iron?

Yes/No

Action taken

● foods rich in calcium?

Yes/No

Action taken

● a variety of fresh fruit and vegetables?

Yes/No

Action taken

● foods rich in zinc?

Yes/No

Action taken

● Comments

### Have healthy catering practices been adopted, for example:

<p>● are alternatives to cooking in oil used where possible?</p>	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>Action taken</p>
<p>● where fat is used in cooking, is alternated with other cooking methods throughout the week?</p>	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>Action taken</p>
<p>● are a variety of breads available?</p>	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>Action taken</p>
<p>● are you encouraging healthier choices where there is more than a set meal available?</p>	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>Action taken</p>
<p>● Comments</p>	
<p>● Are children eating all the food they have?</p>	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>Action taken</p>
<p>● Which foods result in the highest waste?</p>	<p>Action taken</p>

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