

# Food Program Facts

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Food and Nutrition Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture

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## The National School Lunch Program/ National School Lunch Week, October 13-19, 1991

### What is National School Lunch Week?

National School Lunch Week is proclaimed annually by the President to recognize school food service workers and the vital role they play in providing balanced, low-cost lunches to our nation's children through the National School Lunch Program. The theme this year is "A Winning Choice."

The week is also a good time to think about the foods provided to the program and the people who produce and distribute them: farmers, processors, distributors, and the people involved in the thousands of state and local school lunch programs.

### What is the National School Lunch Program?

The National School Lunch Program, established in 1946, is a federally assisted meal program which provides balanced, low-cost or free lunches to more than 24 million children each school day. The lunch program is administered nationally by the U.S. Department of Agriculture through its Food and Nutrition Service. At the state level, it is usually administered by the state education agency, which operates the program through agreements with local schools.

### How does the program work?

Schools that choose to take part in the lunch program get cash subsidies and donated foods from USDA. In return, they must serve lunches that meet federal "meal pattern" requirements, and they must offer free or reduced-price lunches to eligible children, operate the food service on a non-profit basis, and make it available to all children without regard to race, color, national origin, sex, age or handicap.

### Who is eligible for free or reduced-price meals?

Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level (\$17,420 for a family of four) are eligible for free meals. Children from families with incomes above 130 percent up to 185 percent of the poverty level (\$24,790 for a family of four) are eligible for reduced-price meals. Children from families over 185 percent pay the school's designated price, though they benefit from reduced costs resulting from USDA foods donated to the schools, and from cash assistance to the schools.

### What are the "meal pattern" requirements?

Schools must offer specific amounts of five food items in order to qualify for federal reimbursements. The minimum amounts to meet the meal pattern in each category are 2 ounces of meat or meat alternate; two servings of vegetable and/or fruit to a total of 3/4 of a cup; a serving of bread or bread alternate; and 8 ounces of milk.



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## What types of foods do schools get from USDA?

USDA provides about 20 percent of the food schools serve. That includes more than 80 varieties, including beef, fish, poultry, fruits and vegetables, dairy foods, vegetable oil and shortening, flour and other grain products, and peanut products. The variety of commodities depends on agricultural market conditions, what is available and at what price.

## How many schools take part in the program?

More than 92,000 schools and residential child care institutions take part in the program. Any public or nonprofit private school of high school grade or under is eligible to take part. The program is available in 95 percent of all public schools, representing 98 percent of all public school children.

## What's new with school lunch? What are the issues?

**Improving the program:** The main focus is, as it has always been, on making the program even better so that it serves the children even better. That means making the foods better and making the program run more smoothly. Five school systems around the country are in the midst of three-year federal grant programs to try innovative new ways to present healthy foods to students in the school lunch program. USDA has already made many improvements in the foods it supplies to the states for their programs, and in the help it gives them in preparing the foods. More pre-processed and pre-prepared foods are being provided, and packaging and shipping procedures have been changed to make it easier for schools to handle and prepare the USDA commodities.

**Serving more nutritious, healthier foods:** USDA has been working for several years to reduce the amount of sugar, salt and fat in school lunch. Some of those efforts include:

- The National School Lunch Program accepts the advice of the new Dietary Guidelines for Americans, issued last fall, which call for Americans to take in no more than 30 percent of their calories from fats. That standard will be implemented gradually into the program, but new nutritional information will be available this year to help school food service staffs as they continue to reduce the fat levels of the foods they serve.
- Recipes provided to schools by USDA three years ago are still in daily use, emphasizing reduction of sugar, salt and fat.
- New ground beef products with a fat content of only about 10 percent were tested during the last school year, and are expected to be available for school programs this year. Fruits and vegetables are processed with less sugar and salt. The availability of low-fat products such as fish, ground turkey and part-skim mozzarella cheese has been extended. More whole-grain products have been included.
- Deep frying is discouraged, and more foods -- including french fries -- are now oven-baked. Tropical oils and animal fats have been eliminated. More changes are expected as the agricultural market changes and school food authorities express new needs.

**Accountability:** USDA is also trying to assure that the school lunch program is closely accountable for the meals it serves. New training materials have been issued that help schools assure that they are keeping accurate counts of the meals they serve, which in turn assures that they receive full reimbursement from the government.

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**Simpler certification for free and reduced-price meals:** Households applying for free or reduced-price meals for their children are now required to provide less detailed information about their income, and only one household adult is required to provide a social security number. Children from households that receive food stamps or Aid to Families with Dependent Children are now deemed to be automatically eligible for free lunches. Information from the household's application for food stamps or AFDC can be used to document eligibility, and no separate application for the lunch program is needed.

### **For further information:**

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