

National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Quick Guide



: The following 5 components must be offered with every lunch meal.

1. Meat/Meat Alternate (M/MA)

- Credit by weight (ounce equivalents)
- Daily and weekly minimums vary by grade groups.
- Crediting is based on the ounce equivalents of meat/meat alternate in a product. Child Nutrition (CN) labels and/or product formulation statements are required for processed MMA products.

	K-5	K-8	6-8	9-12
Daily minimums	1 oz eq	1 oz eq	1 oz eq	2 oz eq
Weekly minimums	8 oz eq	9 oz eq	9 oz eq	10 oz eq

2. Grains

- Credit by weight (ounce equivalents)
- Daily and weekly minimums vary by grade groups.
- Crediting is determined by comparing the weight of the food product to those listed in [Exhibit A](#) or calculating grams of creditable grains in a recipe. Refer to the USDA [Food Buying Guide](#) for information.
- At least 80% of grains offered must be whole grain-rich.

	K-5	K-8	6-8	9-12
Daily minimums	1 oz eq	1 oz eq	1 oz eq	2 oz eq
Weekly minimums	8 oz eq	8 oz eq	8 oz eq	10 oz eq

3. Vegetables

- Credit by volume (cups)
- Creditable forms of vegetables include fresh, frozen, and canned.
- Vegetable subgroup requirements must be met weekly: dark green, red/orange, beans/peas/lentils, starchy, and other.
 - Beans/peas/lentils may be offered as a meat/meat alternate or vegetable but not both components in the same meal.
- Leafy vegetables credit as half of the volume served (e.g. 1 cup credits as ½ cup).

4. Fruit

- Credit by volume (cups)
- Creditable forms of fruit include fresh, frozen without sugar, canned in water, light syrup or juice, dried, and pasteurized, 100% juice.
- Dried fruit credits as twice the volume served (e.g. ¼ cup credits as ½ cup of fruit).
- No more than half of weekly fruit offerings can be in the form of juice.

5. Milk

- The minimum serving size is 8 ounces.
- At least two varieties of low-fat or fat-free milk must be offered.

This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

- Flavored and/or unflavored may be offered.
- Water and juice may not be substituted for milk.
- Non-dairy milk may not be substituted without proper documentation.

Dietary Specifications for School Year 2026

Weekly Calorie Ranges:

K-5: 550 - 650 kcal
 K-8: 600 - 650 kcal
 6-8: 600 - 700 kcal
 9-12: 750 - 850 kcal

Weekly Average Sodium Limit:

K-5: ≤ 1,110 mg
 K-8: ≤ 1,110 mg
 6-8: ≤ 1,225 mg
 9-12: ≤ 1,280 mg

Weekly Saturated Fat Limit: < 10% of total calories.

Added Sugar:

Breakfast cereals: No more than 6 grams of added sugar per dry ounce
 Yogurt: No more than 12 grams added sugar per 6 ounces
 Flavored milk: No more than 10 grams of added sugar per 8 fluid ounces

Menu Planning

- All meal choices must offer the daily and weekly minimum requirements for the 5 food components (grains, meat/meat alternate, fruit, vegetables and milk).
- All foods and condiments that students have access to as part of a reimbursable meal must be included in the weekly averages for dietary specifications.
- The menu planner must be able to document compliance with the meal pattern using standardized recipes, the Food Buying Guide and/or Child Nutrition (CN) labels (if available), and/or manufacturer's product formulation statements.

Offer versus Serve (OVS)

- Students must be offered all 5 food components in portions planned to meet the minimum daily & weekly quantities for each age/grade group.
- Under OVS, all students must be allowed to decline up to 2 components.
- All students must select at least a ½ cup fruit or vegetable, or a combination of fruits and vegetables.
- OVS is required at high schools and is optional for elementary and middle schools.

Other Requirements

- Plain potable water must be available at no charge to students during lunch service. Often this requirement is met by allowing students access to a nearby water fountain or cups and a portable container of water is put in the cafeteria during meal service.
- Meal Signage – Schools must identify all foods that are part of a reimbursable meal near or at the beginning of all serving lines.
- Lunch must be offered between the hours of 10:00 am – 2:00 pm