

Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools

Recommended Nutrition Standards for Foods Outside of School Meal Programs

Information for Parents, Guardians, Teachers, and School Staff

Introduction

Because most U.S. children consume a large portion of their daily food intake at school, the school food environment can have an important influence on the diets of children and adolescents. Foods and beverages provided through school breakfast, lunch, and afterschool snack programs must meet certain nutritional requirements to receive federal reimbursement. However, many schools also sell foods separate from these school meals—as à la carte offerings in school cafeterias or in school stores, snack bars, or vending machines—that are not subject to federal nutritional requirements. These foods are called “competitive foods” because they compete with school meals.

To provide guidance for the nutritional content and availability of competitive foods, the Institute of Medicine (IOM), which advises Congress on matters of health and science, issued a report in 2007 entitled *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools*. In the report, IOM recommended that

- Federally reimbursable school nutrition programs should be the main source of nutrition in schools.
- Opportunities for competitive foods should be limited.
- If competitive foods are available, they should consist primarily of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products.

This fact sheet answers commonly asked questions about the *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools* report. It also offers suggestions to help parents, guardians, teachers, and school staff support schools in offering foods consistent with an overall healthy diet.

Why do we need standards for competitive foods such as the IOM Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools?

- Competitive food sources (e.g., à la carte, vending, school stores) compete with federally regulated school meals, often offering foods and beverages high in calories, sugar, and fat.
- Children in the United States are increasingly becoming overweight and obese, and most do not meet recommendations for a healthy diet. By adhering to these recommended standards, schools can help children meet dietary guidelines and reduce their risks for diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other health problems.
- The school environment is one of several settings that can influence children’s food choices and eating habits. By ensuring that food offerings are consistent with an overall healthy diet, schools can model healthy eating behaviors.

To which foods do the IOM-recommended standards apply?

- These recommended standards address competitive foods and beverages that are offered as à la carte items during school meals or in school snack bars, stores, vending machines, or canteens. The *Standards* also apply to foods and beverages provided during other school activities, such as classroom parties, classroom snacks, school celebrations, fundraisers, or school meetings.
- The *Standards* are intended to be applied throughout the school day at all schools *and* after school during school-based events or activities.

Which foods and beverages are recommended under the IOM Standards?

The *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools* provides recommendations for the nutritional content of competitive foods and beverages and recommends that foods be categorized into two tiers:

- Tier 1 refers to competitive foods and beverages that may be offered to students in all grades at all times of day.
- Tier 2 refers to competitive foods and beverages that fall short of Tier 1 standards and may be offered only to high school students and only after school.

The following table outlines the criteria for each tier and gives examples of foods and beverages that meet the recommended standards.

Foods and Beverages Recommended by the Institute of Medicine's

Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools

For All Students at All Times of Day (Tier 1)

Examples

- Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, combination products, fat-free and low-fat milk and milk products, lactose-free and soy beverages, per portion as packaged:
 - » ≤200 calories;
 - » ≤35% of total calories from fat;
 - » <10% of calories from saturated fats;
 - » Zero trans fat (≤ 0.5 g per serving);
 - » ≤35% of calories from total sugars; *and*
 - » ≤200 mg sodium.

- Individual fruits—apples, pears, oranges.
- Fruit cups packed in juice or water.
- Vegetables—baby carrots, broccoli, edamame.
- Dried or dehydrated fruits—raisins, apricots, cherries.
- 100% fruit juice or low-sodium 100% vegetable juice.
- Low-fat, low-salt, whole-grain crackers or chips.
- Whole-grain, low-sugar cereals.
- 100% whole-grain mini bagels.
- 8-oz servings of low-fat, fruit-flavored yogurt with ≤30 g of total sugars.
- 8-oz servings of low-fat or nonfat chocolate or strawberry milk with ≤22 g of total sugars.
- Low-sodium, whole-grain bars containing sunflower seeds, almonds, or walnuts.

For High School Students, After School Only (Tier 2)

Examples

- Any foods or beverages from Tier 1.
- Snack foods that are ≤200 calories per portion as packaged, and
 - » ≤35% of total calories from fat;
 - » <10% of calories from saturated fats;
 - » Zero trans fat (≤ 0.5 g per serving);
 - » ≤35% of calories from total sugars; *and*
 - » ≤200 mg sodium.
- Sugar-free, caffeine-free beverages with
 - » Nonnutritive sweeteners;
 - » Not vitamin- or nutrient-fortified; *and*
 - » <5 calories per portion as packaged.

- Low-salt baked potato chips (≤200 mg of sodium), crackers, and pretzels.
- Animal crackers with ≤35% of calories from sugars.
- Graham crackers with ≤35% of calories from sugars.
- Ice cream bars low in sugar and fat.
- Caffeine-free, calorie-free, nonfortified soft drinks.

Examples of Items that Do Not Meet the Standards

- Potato chips or pretzels that have too much sugar or salt (i.e., exceeding the values listed above).
- Cheese crackers that have too much fat or sodium.
- Breakfast or granola bars that have too much fat or sugar.
- Ice cream products that have too much fat or sugar.
- Cake, cupcakes, or cookies with too much sugar or salt.
- Fortified sports drinks or fortified water.
- Gum, licorice, or candy.
- Fruit smoothies with added sugar.
- Regular colas or sodas with sugar or caffeine.

Additional Standards for Foods and Beverages

- Make plain, drinkable water available throughout the school day at no cost to students.
- Offer sports drinks only to student athletes engaged in school sport programs involving vigorous activity for more than 1 hour.
- Foods and beverages should not be used as rewards or discipline for academic performance or behavior.
- Reduce marketing of Tier 2 foods and beverages in high schools.
- Encourage the use of Tier 1 foods and beverages for fundraising activities both during and after school at elementary and middle schools. Allow Tier 1 and 2 foods and beverages for fundraising activities at high schools.
- Allow both Tier 1 and 2 foods and beverages for evening and community school activities involving adults.

Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools

Do the IOM Standards apply to bag lunches or snacks that students bring from home?

The *Standards* do not address foods or beverages that individual students bring from home. However, they do apply to snacks and drinks brought in for an entire classroom of students, such as for class parties, birthday celebrations, or similar events.

Do the IOM Standards call for snacks to be removed from schools?

No, but they do recommend that if competitive foods are available, they should consist primarily of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products.

What can parents, guardians, teachers, and school staff do to support these recommended standards and help schools model and reinforce healthy eating behaviors?

- Become familiar with the IOM Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools.
- Find out which snacks and drinks offered outside the school meal programs are available to students in your school's cafeteria, stores, vending machines, and during classroom and afterschool activities, and compare them to the *Standards*.
- Share information about the IOM recommendations at parent-teacher organization meetings and similar events.
- Identify foods and non-food options (such as pencils, stickers, or other small prizes) that might be best for classroom celebrations, classroom awards, and other school-based activities.
- Promote alternatives to candy that can be sold for school fundraisers, such as flower bulbs, fruits, books, or candles.
- Educate students about nutrition so they can
 - » Become advocates for promoting healthy options in schools.
 - » Recognize the importance of a healthy school environment.
 - » Make healthy food and beverage choices throughout the school day.
- Encourage school administrators to bring district and school nutrition policies into alignment with the *Standards*.

Resources

- Stallings VA, Yaktine AL, editors. *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools: Leading the Way Toward Healthier Youth*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; 2007. Available at www.iom.edu/CMS/3788/30181/42502.aspx.
- Food and Nutrition Service. Changing the Scene—Improving the School Nutrition Environment. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture; 2000. Available at <http://teamnutrition.usda.gov/Resources/changing.html>.
- CDC. *Healthy Youth: Nutrition and the Health of Young People*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2007. Available at www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/nutrition/facts.htm.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2005. Available at www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/report/default.htm.

Nutrition Standards *for Foods in Schools*

Standards for Food Content

- Standard 1:** Snacks, foods, and beverages meet the following criteria for dietary fat per portion as packaged
- No more than 35% of total calories from fat.
 - Less than 10% of total calories from saturated fats.
 - Zero trans fat (≤ 0.5 g per serving).
- Standard 2:** Snacks, foods, and beverages provide no more than 35% of calories from total sugars per portion as packaged. Exceptions to the standard are:
- 100% fruits and fruit juices in all forms without added sugars.
 - 100% vegetables and vegetable juices without added sugars.
 - Unflavored nonfat and low-fat milk and yogurt; flavored nonfat and low-fat milk can contain no more than 22 g of total sugars per 8-oz portion, and flavored nonfat and low-fat yogurt can contain no more than 30 g of total sugars per 8-oz serving.
- Standard 3:** Snack items are 200 calories or less per portion as packaged and à la carte entrée items do not exceed calorie limits on comparable National School Lunch Program items.
- Standard 4:** Snack items meet a sodium content limit of 200 mg or less per portion as packaged or 480 mg or less per entrée portion as served à la carte.
- Standard 5:** Beverages containing nonnutritive sweeteners are only allowed in high school after the end of the school day.
- Standard 6:** Foods and beverages are caffeine-free, with the exception of trace amounts of naturally occurring caffeine-related substances.

Standards for the School Day

- Standard 7:** Foods and beverages offered during the school day are limited to those in Tier 1.
- Standard 8:** Plain, potable water is available throughout the school day at no cost to students.
- Standard 9:** Sports drinks are not available in the school setting except when provided by the school for student athletes participating in sport programs involving vigorous activity of more than 1 hour's duration.
- Standard 10:** Foods and beverages are not used as rewards or discipline for academic performance or behavior.
- Standard 11:** Minimize marketing of Tier 2 foods and beverages in the high school setting by
- Locating Tier 2 food and beverage distribution in low student traffic areas.
 - Ensuring that the exterior of vending machines does not depict commercial products or logos or suggest that consumption of vended items conveys a health or social benefit.

Standards for the After-School Setting

- Standard 12:** Tier 1 snack items are allowed after school for activities for elementary and middle schools. Tier 1 and Tier 2 snacks are allowed after school for high school.
- Standard 13:** For on-campus fundraising activities during the school day, Tier 1 foods and beverages are allowed for elementary and middle schools; Tier 1 and 2 foods and beverages are allowed for high schools. For evening and community activities that include adults, Tier 1 and 2 foods and beverages are encouraged.



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