



School Lunch: More Than a Convenient Option

It takes a real balancing act for a bagged lunch to equal the same nutrient package provided in a school lunch. Studies show that children who eat school lunch have higher nutrient intakes, both at lunch and over the course of an entire day.ⁱ This is great news, because when children are better nourished, they perform better in school. From children to parents to teachers, everyone benefits from a nutritious school lunch.

School Lunches and Children's Nutrient Requirements

School lunches are healthy. To qualify for federal reimbursement, a school lunch must provide:

- One-third of children's daily calorie needs
- One-third of children's daily needs for five nutrients that tend to be low in their diets — calcium, protein, vitamins A and C, and iron
- Less than 30 percent of calories from fat, and less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat when averaged over a week. To meet these guidelines, many schools modify menu items. For example, baked instead of fried chicken nuggets, and cheese pizza made with lower-fat cheese.

School Wellness, School Lunch and Nutrient-Rich Foods

The 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* call for increased consumption of nutrient-rich foods from all the food groups — nutrients that fall short in most Americans' diets. Today's school lunches encourage children to eat more fresh fruits, whole grains, vegetables and low-fat milk options. In fact, as schools focus on wellness, they are focusing on offering even more nutritious choices from all food groups. A recent survey of over 950 school nutrition directors found that one year after the adoption of school wellness policies:ⁱⁱ

- 83 percent of survey respondents increased the number of healthful food options in the cafeteria as a result of their school wellness policy.
- Almost half indicated that the changes resulted in healthy choices and behaviors of students.
- Schools are offering more items like whole-wheat, reduced-fat cheese pizza; a variety of fruits and vegetables, including jicama salad and kiwi; hummus and pita bread; fat-free flavored milk and low-fat yogurt.





School Lunch Milk Offerings

Milk at lunch makes an important contribution to children's overall nutrient intake. As part of the lineup of nutritious choices, school meals are required to offer a variety of milk options, including fat-free and low-fat milk. Schools can also offer fat-free flavored milk and lactose-reduced milk. Research shows that when flavored milk is offered it can help close the calcium gap, because children prefer it and will drink more milk when it's flavored. Research shows that:

- Children who go for a container of milk at lunch are more likely to make the calcium grade than children who drink other beverages, such as juice drinks, at lunch.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Lunchtime milk drinkers also have higher intakes of nutrients typically low in children's diets, such as vitamin A and zinc.^{iv}

Recess Before Lunch

Kids want and need to play, and they need to eat! Is it possible to have adequate time for both? Yes, according to the research — when recess is held before lunch. Having recess before lunch can make a big difference in lots of ways. Mary Jane Gettlinger's groundbreaking 1995 study demonstrated that kids waste less food with recess before lunch.^v Subsequent research and pilot studies demonstrate that recess before lunch generates impressive benefits, including:

- Less wasted food and milk — Children get more nutrients and are less hungry when they return to class.
- Better lunchroom behavior — Students have the time and opportunity to enjoy their meal without feeling the need to rush out and play. Having used excess energy, they are more relaxed, quieter and ready to eat.
- Improved classroom performance — Students are calmer, more settled and ready to learn.
- Improved afternoon classroom behavior — Teachers have more uninterrupted teaching time after lunch.



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What Teachers Can Do

The school cafeteria is the logical place for students to apply the nutrition concepts that you teach in the classroom. Take advantage of opportunities to connect classroom learning with the cafeteria:

- During your nutrition unit, join children in the school breakfast and/or lunch line. Let them see you choose nutritious foods, including milk. Spend time talking about students' choices and relate them to what they are learning in the classroom.
- Work with your school's nutrition professional(s) to create richer learning experiences for students, such as touring the kitchen, making and tasting nutritious snacks, evaluating menus and new menu items, planning a new breakfast, lunch or snack for the school menu, conducting a cafeteria survey or helping with a cafeteria promotion.
- If you drink a beverage or eat while on breakfast and/or lunch duty, model healthy choices. For example, drink low-fat milk, water or 100 percent fruit juice instead of soda or diet soda or coffee.
- Review the school breakfast and lunch menu as a classroom exercise. Ask students to determine if it includes foods from all Five Food Groups.
- Invite the school nutrition director to talk to students about school meals and good nutrition.

ⁱ USDA Food and Nutrition Service. [Children's Diets in the Mid-1990's: Dietary Intake and Its Relationship with School Meal Participation](http://www.fns.usda.gov/childrens-diet-mid-1990s-dietary-intake-and-its-relationship-school-meal-participation), 2001. Accessed at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/childrens-diet-mid-1990s-dietary-intake-and-its-relationship-school-meal-participation>. June 18, 2015.

ⁱⁱ School Nutrition Association and School Nutrition Foundation. From Cupcakes to Carrots: Local Wellness Policies One Year Later, September 2007. Accessed at: <http://www.cancer.org/acs/groups/content/@nho/documents/document/fromcupcakestocarrotspdf.pdf>. June 18, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Johnson, RK, et al. The nutritional consequences of flavored-milk consumption by school-aged children and adolescents in the United States. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 2002. 102:853-56.

^{iv} Johnson, RK, et al. The Association between Noon Beverage Consumption and the Diet Quality of School-Age Children. *Journal of Child Nutrition and Management*, 1998. 2:95-100.

^v Gettlinger, MJ, et al. Food Waste is Reduced when Elementary-School Children Have Recess before Lunch. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 1996. 9:906-8.



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