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Guidance

# School food standards practical guide

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## Applies to England

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Eating in school should be a pleasurable experience. These school food standards are designed to help children develop healthy eating habits, and ensure that they have the energy and nutrition they need to get the most from their whole school day. It's important to cook food that looks good and tastes delicious.

Staff should talk to children about what is on offer, and recommend dishes, to reduce queuing time. Food should be served in a pleasant environment where children can eat with their friends.

As a general principle, it's important to provide a wide range of foods across the week. Use fresh, sustainable and locally sourced ingredients (best of all, from the school vegetable garden) and talk to the children about what they are eating.

The food-based standards specify which types of food should be served at school and how often.

Remember to use [Sustainable procurement the government buying standards \(https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/sustainable-procurement-the-government-buying-standards-gbs\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/sustainable-procurement-the-government-buying-standards-gbs) alongside these standards to help reduce salt, saturated fat and sugar in children's diets.

A child's healthy, balanced diet should consist of:

- plenty of fruit and vegetables
- plenty of unrefined starchy foods
- some meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein
- some milk and dairy foods
- a small amount of food and drink high in fat, sugar and salt

## The standards for school lunch

Use the [checklist for school food lunches \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools).

### Starchy foods

Starchy food is an important source of energy and B vitamins. Flour is fortified with iron and calcium. Wholegrain varieties of bread and pasta are good sources of fibre, which is important for a healthy digestive system.

Starchy foods help children feel full, so they are less likely to snack on foods high in fat, saturated fat, sugar or salt.

You should include:

- one or more portions of food from this group every day
- 3 or more different starchy foods each week
- one or more wholegrain varieties of starchy food each week
- starchy food cooked in fat or oil no more than 2 days each week (applies across the whole school day)
- bread - with no added fat or oil - must be available every day

You can:

- use wholegrain varieties of starchy foods
- try using a 50:50 mix for pasta and rice
- use at least half wholemeal or granary flour when making bread, puddings, cakes, biscuits, batters and sauces
- use different types of bread and look for products with higher fibre

Do not add salt to water when cooking pasta, rice and other starchy foods. Instead, add flavour to the main dish by using herbs, spices, garlic and vegetables.

## Fruit and vegetables

Getting children to eat more fruit and vegetables is vital for good health. Introducing children to a wide variety of fruit and vegetables establishes healthy eating habits for life, reducing the risk of heart disease, stroke and some cancers.

Fruit and vegetables are a good source of essential vitamins and minerals. They are also often a good source of fibre.

Fruit and vegetables add colour, flavour and variety to meals.

You should include:

- one or more portions of vegetables or salad as an accompaniment every day
- one or more portions of fruit every day
- a dessert containing at least 50% fruit 2 or more times each week
- at least 3 different fruits and 3 different vegetables each week

You can:

- make sure your meal deals always contain at least one portion of vegetables and one portion of fruit
- provide at least 2 different coloured vegetables and fruits each day
- buy fruit and vegetables that are in season
- choose canned products in water or natural juice, with no added salt or sugar
- steam vegetables or boil them in a minimal amount of water
- display fruit and vegetables prominently and attractively
- talk to the children to encourage them to try new vegetable and fruit dishes
- using produce from the school garden is a great way to encourage children to try new vegetables and fruit
- price a portion of fruit so that it is cheaper than a dessert
- add lots of vegetables into composite dishes such as Bolognese or chilli con carne

Pulses count as vegetables. However, if you are serving pulses as a non-dairy protein for vegetarians, you will need a separate vegetable serving as well.

Do not serve baked beans more than once a week and choose low-sugar and low-salt varieties.

## **Milk and dairy**

Dairy foods are a rich source of energy, protein, calcium, vitamin A and riboflavin.

You should include:

- a portion of food from this group every day
- lower fat milk, which must be available for drinking at least once a day during school hours

You can:

- offer frozen yoghurt as an alternative to ice cream
- buy low-sugar varieties of milkshakes and yoghurt drinks. You could make them yourself using fruit to sweeten them

Hard cheeses such as cheddar tend to be higher in saturated fat than softer cheese. When using hard cheeses, choose stronger-tasting varieties and use smaller amounts.

## Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein

Foods from this group provide protein and essential minerals, including iron and zinc.

Oily fish provides omega-3 fatty acids, which are beneficial to health, and vitamins A and D.

You must include:

- a portion of food from this group every day
- a portion of meat or poultry on 3 or more days each week
- oily fish once or more every 3 weeks
- for vegetarians, a portion of non-dairy protein on 3 or more days each week
- a meat or poultry product (manufactured or homemade, and meeting the legal requirements) no more than once each week in primary schools and twice each week in secondary schools (applies across the whole school day)

You can

- ensure vegetarian meals are as varied as the rest of the menu by using pulses twice a week, soya, tofu, or mycoprotein-based meat substitute once or twice each week, and eggs and cheese once or twice each week
- encourage all children to have a meat-free day each week, using alternatives such as pulses, soya mince, tofu and mycoprotein-based meat substitute
- visit the [Marine Stewardship Council \(https://www.msc.org/home\)](https://www.msc.org/home) for advice on buying responsibly sourced fish

Be aware that canned tuna is not an oily fish as the omega-3 fatty acids are destroyed in the canning process.

## Foods high in fat, sugar and salt

Foods from this group are often high in energy (calories) but provide few other nutrients.

Reducing saturated fat intake can help reduce the risk of heart disease. Eating unsaturated fats instead, which are found in foods such as oily fish, nuts and seeds, and sunflower and olive oils, can help lower blood cholesterol.

Too much salt can encourage a taste for salty foods, potentially leading to high blood pressure in later life.

High sugar intake provides unnecessary calories and can lead to weight gain and tooth decay.

You should include:

- no more than 2 portions of food that have been deep-fried, batter-coated, or breadcrumb-coated, each week (applies across the whole school day)
- no more than 2 portions of food which include pastry each week (applies across the whole school day)
- savoury crackers or breadsticks, which can be served at lunch with fruit, vegetables or dairy food
- desserts, cakes and biscuits but they must not contain any confectionery

You should avoid:

- snacks, except nuts, seeds, vegetables and fruit with no added salt, sugar or fat (applies across the whole school day)
- confectionery, chocolate or chocolate-coated products (applies across the whole school day)

You must not provide salt to add to food after it has been cooked (applies across the whole school day).

Any condiments must be limited to sachets or portions of no more than 10 grams or one teaspoonful (applies across the whole school day).

You can:

- choose mono- and poly-unsaturated fats, such as rapeseed, soya, sunflower and olive oils, wherever possible for cooking or salad dressings
- avoid products that list partially hydrogenated fat or oil on the label
- use higher fibre ingredients, such as wholemeal flour, in addition to, or instead of, white flour
- reduce the amount of sugar used in dishes
- use fresh or dried fruit to sweeten dishes
- ask suppliers for nutritional information and read food labels to check the amount of fat, saturated fat, salt and sugars in their products
- use herbs, spices, garlic, vegetables and fruits to add flavour to dishes instead of salt
- choose biscuits, cakes and pastries that are lower in fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt

Do not use flavour enhancers such as MSG or E621. These can be very high in sodium.

## Healthy drinks

Water should be the default drink for every child. The more it is offered, the more readily they will accept it. Sugary or sweetened drinks often have no nutritional value, contribute to weight gain, and can cause tooth decay.

Free, fresh drinking water must be available at all times.

The only drinks permitted are:

- plain water (still or carbonated)
- lower fat milk or lactose reduced milk
- fruit or vegetable juice (maximum 150mls)
- plain soya, rice or oat drinks enriched with calcium
- plain fermented milk (for example yoghurt) drinks
- combinations of fruit or vegetable juice with plain water (still or carbonated, with no added sugars or honey)
- combinations of fruit juice and lower fat milk or plain yoghurt, plain soya, rice or oat drinks enriched with calcium; cocoa and lower fat milk; flavoured lower fat milk, all with less than 5% added sugars or honey
- tea, coffee, hot chocolate

Combination drinks are limited to a portion size of 330mls. They may contain added vitamins or minerals, and no more than 150mls of fruit or vegetable juice. Fruit or vegetable juice combination drinks must be at least 45% fruit or vegetable juice.

You can:

- provide jugs of fresh tap water together with cups or glasses on tables and at the serving counter
- consider installing a water cooler which uses tap water, or water fountains in the dining room and around the school encouraging the use of refillable bottles
- provide drinks that are unsweetened, unfortified and additive-free
- avoid drinks containing preservatives, flavourings, colourings and sweeteners

## School food other than lunch

Many of the food-based standards apply to food served throughout the school day, including breakfast, midmorning break and after school clubs, as well as from vending machines and tuck shops.



Use the [checklist for school food other than lunch](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools>).

As with the other food standards, these do not apply at parties, celebrations to mark religious or cultural occasions, or at fund-raising events.

## Starchy foods

You should not serve starchy food cooked in fat or oil more than 2 days each week (applies across the whole school day).

You can serve:

- potatoes
- rice
- pasta
- bread (although these are restricted if cooked in fat or oil)
- malt loaf
- fruit bread

Porridge is a great breakfast food. Use fruit to sweeten if necessary. Otherwise, choose fortified breakfast cereals with higher fibre and low or medium sugar content. Avoid cereals with lots of added sugar and salt.

## Fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegetables should be available in all school food outlets.

You can serve:

- pots of sliced or chopped fresh fruit
- fruit kebabs
- vegetable sticks with dips
- salad shaker pots

## Milk and dairy

Lower fat milk must be available for drinking at least once a day during school hours.

You can serve lower fat natural (plain) yoghurt and plain lower fat fromage frais, and add fruit to sweeten

## **Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein**

You cannot serve a meat or poultry product (manufactured or homemade and meeting the legal requirements) more than once each week in primary schools, and twice each week in secondary schools (applies across the whole school day).

You can serve:

- a variety of sandwiches and wraps
- muffin fillings or toast toppings, such as eggs, houmous, sliced meat, poultry, fish, canned fish, baked beans
- tortillas
- fajitas
- burritos
- quesadillas
- enchiladas
- omelette
- Spanish omelette
- frittata

## **Foods high in fat, sugar and salt**

You should not serve:

- more than 2 portions of food that has been deep-fried, batter-coated, breadcrumb-coated, each week (applies across the whole school day)
- more than 2 portions of food which include pastry each week (applies across the whole school day)
- snacks, except nuts, seeds, vegetables and fruit with no added salt, sugar or fat (applies across the whole school day)
- savoury crackers or breadsticks

- confectionery, chocolate and chocolate-coated products (applies across the whole school day)
- cakes, biscuits, pastries or desserts (except yoghurt or fruit-based desserts containing at least 50% fruit)

You must not provide salt to add to food after it has been cooked (applies across the whole school day).

Condiments should be limited to sachets or portions of no more than 10 grams or one teaspoonful (applies across the whole school day).

Foods high in fat, sugar and salt are restricted or not permitted at times other than lunch.

## Healthy drinks

This applies across the whole school day.

Free, fresh drinking water must be available at all times.

The only drinks permitted are:

- plain water (still or carbonated)
- lower fat milk or lactose reduced milk
- fruit or vegetable juice (max 150mls)
- plain soya, rice or oat drinks enriched with calcium; plain fermented milk (for example yoghurt) drinks
- combinations of fruit or vegetable juice with plain water (still or carbonated, with no added sugars or honey)
- combinations of fruit juice and lower fat milk or plain yoghurt, plain soya, rice or oat drinks enriched with calcium; cocoa and lower fat milk; flavoured lower fat milk, all with less than 5% added sugars or honey
- tea, coffee, hot chocolate

Combination drinks are limited to a portion size of 330mls. They may contain added vitamins or minerals, and no more than 150mls fruit or vegetable juice. Fruit or vegetable juice combination drinks must be at least 45% fruit or vegetable juice.

# How to increase the iron, zinc and calcium content of meals

Research shows that some children in the UK are not getting enough iron, zinc and calcium in their diets to support their rapid growth. Here are some ways to boost their intake of these important minerals.

## Starchy foods

Iron:

- wholemeal bread
- fortified breakfast cereals

Zinc:

- wholegrain and wheat germ breads
- plain popcorn

Calcium:

- bread (except wholemeal)
- bread-based products

## Fruit and vegetables:

Iron:

- pulses, for example. chickpeas, lentils, beans (not green beans)
- dried apricots
- raisins

Calcium:

- dried figs

## Milk and dairy foods

**Zinc:**

- cheese

**Calcium:**

- milk
- yoghurt
- cheese
- milk-based desserts for example custard
- soya drinks enriched with calcium

## **Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein**

**Iron:**

- lean red meat for example, beef, lamb
- soya beans
- pulses, for example chickpeas, lentils, beans (not green beans)

**Zinc:**

- lean red meat for example, beef, lamb, pork
- dark poultry meat
- oily fish for example, canned sardines, pilchards, mackerel
- mycoprotein-based meat substitute
- peanuts, ground nuts, almonds
- sesame seeds

**Calcium:**

- canned sardines or pilchards, drained and mashed up with the bones
- tofu (soya bean)

## **Managing food allergies and intolerances**

Food allergies or intolerances must be taken seriously.

Schools and caterers should work closely with parents to support children with medical needs, allergies or intolerances. Please read the [allergy guidance for schools](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools/allergy-guidance-for-schools) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools/allergy-guidance-for-schools>).

## Procurement and government buying standards

The following resources are available to caterers and cooks to help them source their food responsibly.

[Sustainable procurement: The Government Buying Standards for food and catering services](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainable-procurement-the-gbs-for-food-and-catering-services) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainable-procurement-the-gbs-for-food-and-catering-services>) set clear technical specifications to assist with buying food and catering services.

Buy seasonal and local food. As well as often being more sustainable in production, it can build greater awareness of local produce and build stronger links with local food suppliers. You can find out more about [local and sustainable food at Sustain](http://www.sustainweb.org) (<http://www.sustainweb.org>).

Choose fish from verifiably sustainable sources, and ideally [Marine Stewardship Council \(MSC\)](https://www.msc.org/home) (<https://www.msc.org/home>) certified.

Reducing food waste can save money and time and be a great way to get pupils involved.

## Further information and advice

[The School Food Plan website](https://www.schoolfoodplan.com) (<https://www.schoolfoodplan.com>) provides ideas about what schools can do to transform their school food, including what children eat in school and how they learn about food. It also provides examples of what other schools are doing to encourage children to eat well and provides the details of many excellent organisations who are there to support schools.

## Recipes and menus

[The School Food Plan](https://www.schoolfoodplan.com) (<https://www.schoolfoodplan.com>) provides examples for a range of recipes and menus that meet the food-based standards and nutrient

framework.

## Useful organisations

The Department for Education sets the standards for school food and is responsible for [The Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2014/1603/made) (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2014/1603/made>).

Public Health England is an executive agency of the Department of Health and Social Care. Its mission is to protect and improve the nation's health and to address inequalities. Its social marketing campaign is [Change4Life](https://www.nhs.uk/change4life) (<https://www.nhs.uk/change4life>), which aims to help Key Stage 1 and 2 pupils understand the benefits of eating well and living a more active lifestyle from an early age.

[The Lead Association for Catering in Education](https://laca.co.uk/) (<https://laca.co.uk/>) is the lead membership organisation for the School Food sector. It has lots of information and advice on school food for members.

[Food for Life Catering Mark](https://www.soilassociation.org/) (<https://www.soilassociation.org/>) provides independent endorsement that food providers are meeting the school food standards and serving food prepared from fresh, sustainable and locally sourced ingredients. It provides a framework to transform food culture through improving school food, meal take up and food education through a whole school approach.

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