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Nebraska's Nutrient Standard Menu Planning Requirements for School Lunches

by Darlene Martin, Extension Nutrition Specialist

Nutrient Standard Menus and Assisted Nutrient Standard Menus are two of the menu planning options in the USDA School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children. The other two are Traditional Food-Based Menus and Enhanced Food-Based Menus, which are based on food components and the quantity of items offered.

Nutrient Standard Menus and Assisted Nutrient Standard Menus are computer-based menu planning systems that allow any foods in any quantities to meet nutritional goals. Enhanced Food-Based Menus and Traditional Food-Based Menus offer foods from specific food groups and in specific quantities.

If a school chooses the Nutrient Standard Menus planning system, the school will conduct a nutrient analysis of its menus. With Assisted Nutrient Standard Menus, an outside consultant who planned the school's menus will conduct the nutrient analysis. During a Nebraska Department of Education review, a check will be made to ensure that the analysis is being done accurately.

The Traditional Food-Based Menus have been successful in providing adequate calories and most nutrients. It did not, however, have quantitative limits for total fat and saturated fat, or encourage an increase in complex carbohydrates and dietary fiber. Nutrient Standard Menus and Assisted Nutrient Standard Menus allow menu planners the flexibility of breaking away from the traditional meal pattern and using a variety of foods in any quantity to improve the nutritional quality of the meal.

Many of the old rules and regulations do not apply to Nutrient Standard Menus and Assisted Nutrient Standard Menus; however, there are many new ones to learn, such as nutrient standards.

What is a Nutrient Standard?

The required level of calories and nutrients for a specific grade or age group is a nutrient standard.

Menus averaged over a week should meet the nutrient standard of the age or grade group for which they are intended. Meeting these standards is the goal for all of the menu planning systems.

Standards for calories and nutrients:

- Calories
 - 30 percent or less calories from fat
 - 10 percent or less calories from saturated fat
- Nutrients
 - Protein
 - Calcium
 - Iron
 - Vitamin A
 - Vitamin C

Foods that contain the above nutrients typically contain the other essential nutrients not specified in the nutrient standards. In Nebraska, schools using nutrient standards menus are analyzed for sodium, fiber, and cholesterol. The nutrient standards for lunch are set, at a minimum, for these grade levels: preschool, grades K-6, grades 7-12, plus an optional standard for grades K-3.

The calorie and nutrient needs of children vary by sex, age, size and activity level. The calorie standards for breakfast and lunch are estimates of the minimum energy needed. But some children, especially older males, may require considerably more than the minimum. Children who are large for their age or more active also need more calories. Menu planners should adjust the amounts of foods served to provide for the calorie needs of all children. Menu planners also may develop their own customized groups corresponding to the age groups in their school. Not all schools' grade structures will match the nutrient standard grade or age groups. Menu planners must be able to select or create Nutrient Standards when planning Nutrient Standard Menus, which are based on their schools' grade or age structure. Menus will be analyzed over a school week using a weighted nutrient analysis with an average based on the projected servings of each menu item.

Nutrient Standard Menus and Assisted Nutrient Standard Menus provide schools the option to combine the total nutrients for breakfast and lunch together in proportion to the participation in each meal. Software systems can combine the two meals for analysis. Schools must use only USDA-approved software for their analysis.

Nutrient Standard Menus and Assisted Nutrient Standard Menus deal with menu items instead of food components and food items. A menu item may be any single food or combination of foods. All menu items served in a meal, including condiments, are included in the nutrient analysis and count toward meeting the nutrient standard for the meal. Meals are required to have three menu items for lunch and for breakfast. There are three categories of menu items: entree, fluid milk and side dishes. The determination of whether a food can be counted as one menu item or two depends on how it is served. If it is served as two items, it is counted as two items. The following example will help you understand how items can be counted.

Nutrient Standard Menus

One Item

Two Items

Hamburger on a Bun

Hamburger Patty, Bun

Turkey and Gravy on Potatoes

Turkey and Gravy, Mashed
Potatoes

Burrito Grande (Tortilla, Meat, Rice, Tomato,
Lettuce, Salsa)

Beef Burrito, Spanish Rice

For more information on how to qualify for reimbursement contact: Nebraska Department of Education-Nutrition Services. Telephone: (402) 471-2488; (800) 731-2233.

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