USDA National School Nutrition Standards Changes
Frequently Asked Questions

December 2023

What are the proposed revisions to the school nutrition standards?
The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has proposed revisions to strengthen the school nutrition standards for federally funded school meals. The proposed changes are informed by the federal Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The proposal includes updated sodium reduction targets and a first-ever limit on added sugars. It also seeks public feedback on two options for ensuring a majority of whole grain rich grains, and seeks feedback on eliminating flavored milk in grades K-8. The proposed standards prioritize children's health, while ensuring that the nutrition standards are achievable and set schools up for success.

When will the ruling on these changes take place?
The USDA solicited public comment on the science-based nutrition standards in 2023 and a final rule is anticipated by April 2024. Implementation will be phased in through SY 2029-2030.

Why are new standards needed?
School meals are the key source of nutrition for millions of children in the U.S., with over 30 million participants The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 made great strides to improve the nutritional quality of school meals, including age-appropriate calorie ranges, lowering saturated fat and sodium, and increasing fruits, vegetables and whole grains on school menus, but there is still room for improvement - especially on sodium and added sugars - to align school meals with the federal Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

- Added Sugars: A 2021 study found that most schools exceeded the DGA limit for added sugars at breakfast (92%), while 69% exceeded the limit at lunch and the leading source of added sugars in school meals (both breakfasts and lunches) was flavored skim milk. CSPI's 2022 School Milk Report Card found that

many flavored milks are high in added sugars, and some by themselves would contain more than 100% of a DGA-aligned limit on added sugars at K-5 breakfast if the USDA set such a standard.

- Sodium: The USDA acknowledges that while the Healthy Eating Index (HEI) score for sodium improved with implementation of the 2012 standards, it remained at a score of 27 percent of the maximum possible score. Compared to the 95 percent for fruits, 82 percent for vegetables, and 95 percent for whole grains, sodium offers the greatest opportunity for improvement in school meals.
- Whole Grains: A 2022 study found that many students who eat both school breakfast and lunch are likely consuming less than half the recommended levels of fiber from school meals, highlighting the need for strong whole-grain standards.

Who developed and supports these new standards?
The USDA based these standards on the latest nutrition science from the federal Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) and they are supported by the American Academy of Pediatricians, American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, American Medical Association, Center for Good Food Purchasing, First Focus on Children, Food Research and Action Center, Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health, and UnidosUS.

Are these guidelines achievable?
These standards are a natural evolution of the 2010 law and many posted school menus are close to our are already meeting parts of the proposed stronger standards. A 2021 report showed that many current school food products offerings could fit within are even stronger sodium and added sugars limits than what the USDA has proposed. To help schools meet the stronger standards, a phased-in timeline is part of the proposal. USDA also launched the Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative to help improve the nutritional quality of school meals through recognition and technical assistance, the generation and sharing of innovative ideas and tested practices, food systems transformation, and grants.

How will these standards improve children's health?

- Healthy school meals are associated with a reduced risk of food insufficiency, better attendance rates, better test scores, and fewer missed school days. recent research suggests that stronger school meal nutrition standards on sodium,added sugars, and whole grains may improve diet, childhood health,

and future adult burdens of cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and associated economic costs.

- Data from the National Institute of Health show that high sodium levels are linked to high blood pressure. These standards gradually decrease the amount of sodium in school meals.
- In 2019, the USDA released its School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, showing the results following the implementation of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act and the Healthy Eating Index (HEI-2010) measurement of diet quality showed a dramatic increase in school meals.

What can people do to ensure these standards are enacted?
Contact Congress and ask that they keep special interests out of the bill to protect kids' health. Sign this CSPI petition and tell Congress to put students' health over profits.

Media Contacts:
Susan Pierson Brown
Seven November, Inc.
susan@sevennovember.com
206.409.4693

Beth Herrell Hall
Union Bay Communications
beth@unionbaycommunications.com
206.679.5157