

New school lunch rules target added sugars, salt

April 25 2024, by Robin Foster



School lunches will soon contain less added sugars and salt under new nutrition standards announced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on Wednesday.

"We all share the goal of helping children reach their full potential," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a [news release](#) announcing the changes. "Like teachers, classrooms, books and computers, nutritious school meals are an essential part of the school environment, and when we raise the bar for school meals, it empowers our kids to achieve greater success inside and outside of the classroom."

The [new standards](#) will be implemented over the next few years, the USDA added.

Schools serve breakfasts and lunches to nearly 30 million children every school day. These meals are the main source of nutrition for more than half of these children, according to the USDA.

The changes announced Wednesday are the first significant reform of school meal standards since the passage of the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. The Biden administration has also created a [national strategy](#) to end hunger and reduce diet-related disease by 2030.

History suggests the moves will work: A 2023 [study](#) found the changes that took place during the Obama administration to push more fruits, vegetables, [whole grains](#) and low-fat dairy products significantly decreased kids' and teens' body mass index.

Current dietary guidelines recommend limiting [added sugars](#) to less than 10% of [daily calorie intake](#), but data from the 2014–15 school year found the average school lunch had 11% added sugars and breakfast had 17% added sugars, CNN reported.

Beginning in the 2025–26 school year, certain products—including [breakfast cereals](#), yogurt and flavored milk—will have specific limits on added sugars. By the 2027–28 school year, weekly meal calories will be capped at 10% added sugars, the USDA said.

The [final rule](#) requires one 15% cut in sodium in lunches and one 10% cut in sodium in breakfasts by the 2027–28 school year.

The new standards are an "important step forward," Nancy Brown, chief executive of the American Heart Association, said in a [statement](#).

"Added sugars are a significant source of excess calories, provide no [nutritional value](#) and may cause [weight gain](#) and increased risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes and other chronic health conditions. We are thrilled to see the USDA has followed the recommendations from a 2022 [citizen petition](#) from the American Heart Association and other public health groups to include an added sugars standard in this final rule," she said.

"However, we are disappointed that the USDA did not establish an added sugars product limit for grain-based desserts, such as cereal bars, doughnuts and toaster pastries, as originally proposed, and that the whole grain standard does not fully align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. In addition, we are discouraged that the final rule makes only slight sodium reductions and does not require more significant reductions over time," she added.

School meals will continue to emphasize fruits and vegetables, whole grains and cultural and religious food preferences for balanced meals that kids want to eat, the USDA said. Beginning next school year, schools will also have the option to require unprocessed products be locally grown, raised or caught.

More information: The USDA has more on [National School Lunch Program](#).

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