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Food & Nutrition Guidelines
FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Produced by the Health Promotion Unit of the Department of Health & Children in conjunction with the Health Boards through their Community Nutrition and Dietetic Services and Schools Health Promotion Teams. Published April 2003.
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The Government has identified school children as one group to be given priority during the planning and delivery of programmes and initiatives for good health throughout life. In the Government’s National Health Promotion Strategy 2000/2005, the two major objectives for children are:

- To promote healthy eating habits and a healthy body image among school-going children and young people.
- To facilitate the implementation of Health Education and Health Promotion Programmes, in partnership with the Department of Education and Science in the implementation of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in all schools consistent with the Health Promoting Schools concept.

To fulfil these objectives, Health Boards through their community nutrition and dietetic service and schools health promotion teams in partnership with the Department of Health and Children have developed these Food & Nutrition Guidelines for Primary Schools. These guidelines are a training resource for Community Dietitians and Health Promotion Teams, and in particular those involved in the in-service training of teachers and the training of other relevant groups within the school setting e.g. Home School Community Liaison Officers, Parent Councils, School Policy Committees or Pupils.

Promoting Healthy Eating in Schools

Eating habits throughout life are established at a young age. Therefore, learning to choose and enjoy different foods in childhood provides the foundation for healthy food choices in adulthood.

The purposes of targeting Primary Schools are:

1. The primary school setting provides an excellent health promotion arena for reaching large sections of the population - children, teachers, families and the surrounding community in an effective and efficient way.
2. Schools through the SPHE, provide opportunities to promote lifelong healthy eating as well as encouraging physical activity. SPHE aims to create a healthy ethos within the school and improve children’s self-esteem and well-being.
3. Teachers play a valuable role in communicating and supporting the healthy eating message, especially through the adoption of a whole school approach to healthy eating. Within a health promoting school consistent messages about healthy eating are communicated through all aspects of school life – the classroom, the curriculum, school breaks, school lunches and physical activity.

The aims of these guidelines are:
To promote nutrition awareness and positively effect healthy eating among school age children.

The objectives of these guidelines are:
- To provide consistent and up to date information in relation to healthy eating for children.
- To provide a resource for the development of a School Food Policy.

As Minister for Health and Children, I am delighted that my Department has initiated the publication of a new and important resource - Food & Nutrition Guidelines for Primary Schools – which will help in the education and development of children.

Good eating habits should be established at an early age and children have a right to learn about different foods so that they can make informed choices throughout their lives.

Making healthy food choices enables children to attain their optimum growth, development and health potential. Healthy eating also allows children to take full advantage of the opportunity to learn and to play during the school day. All children should be made aware of the Food Pyramid and how it can be used as the basis for healthy eating.

Recent research, commissioned by my Department, has highlighted disturbing trends including an increase in both childhood obesity and levels of physical inactivity. Therefore, the publication of these Guidelines is both timely and critical.

Facilitating health professionals and teachers in providing important information on healthy eating and physical activity, will help shape the future for younger generations. Their role in the dissemination of the healthy eating message is vital and ensures that positive messages are communicated and nurtured, through all stages of childhood.

I would like to encourage all schools to use this resource for the development of a Healthy School Food Policy.

I would also like to acknowledge the work of the Health Boards, their Community Nutrition and Dietetic Services and the Schools Health Promotion Teams for working alongside the Health Promotion Unit in preparing these Guidelines.

Michael Martin T.D.
Minister for Health and Children
The S.P.H.E (Social, Personal & Health Education) Food and Nutrition curriculum for Primary Schools outlines key issues relating to food and nutrition and recommends that these are explored to the depths that is appropriate for the class. Key healthy eating messages that are consistent and fact-based assist children in decision making and forming of attitudes and beliefs around healthy eating.

Healthy eating and physical activity represent a balance that is essential for good health, therefore, physical activity should also be incorporated into each key message.

**In the delivery of S.P.H.E an overview of healthy eating should include reference to the following 5 points:**

1. **Food and nutrition are important for growth and development**
   - Folic acid and Pregnancy
   - Breastfeeding
   - Growth, Development and Dental and Oral Hygiene
   - Energy, Concentration & Performance, for example the importance of eating breakfast
   - Calcium & Vitamin D
   - Iron

2. **Variety, balance and moderation: The Food Groups and different nutrients**
   - Food pyramid: the 4 basic food groups
   - Variety, balance, moderation in relation to choice of snack foods
   - Basic-nutrients: Protein, Fat, Carbohydrate, Fibre
   - Micro-nutrients

3. **Food hygiene**
   - Personal hygiene – hand washing etc.
   - Best before/use by/sell by dates
   - Food handling – cooking, re-heating – raw foods
   - Food preparation
   - Food storage

4. **Food choices and factors influencing these**
   - Likes/dislikes
   - Cultural diversity
   - Availability, supply and demand
   - Labelling
   - Food additives
   - Peer pressure
   - Nutrition Policy – guidelines for primary schools

5. **Food with respect to health, illness and special conditions**
   - Requirements for certain conditions, e.g. constipation, dental caries, anaemia
   - Different requirements for different age groups
   - Pregnancy and breastfeeding, e.g. the importance of Folic Acid

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**Promoting healthy eating messages**

**The following points should be considered when planning a healthy eating programme.**

- Good nutrition is essential for school children. They need to receive a sound understanding about why a variety of food is important for their optimum growth, development and health.
- They should be encouraged to have practical experience in preparing their own lunches and meals.
- A positive attitude to food should be encouraged. Children should enjoy their food. It is important to communicate the message that all foods have a place in a balanced diet. Foods should not be labelled as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Food should never be used as a reward.
- Research suggests that the provision of nutritious school food enhances not only the child’s health but also allows the child to take full advantage of the education provided by improving attention levels and concentration spans. Schools should be encouraged to develop their own policy on healthy eating. Children’s appetites vary with age and according to times of accelerated growth, therefore, it is important that the food intake of school children should not be limited unnecessarily. Children need energy and nutrients to fulfil growth needs and requirements for everyday activities.
- Children may need three meals and three snacks each day to ensure that their appetite and energy needs are met. The size of meals and the number of snacks required will depend on the child’s age and stage of development.
- Physical activity is integral to any healthy eating programme, and hence should also be promoted and encouraged.
- Involving teachers, parents and older children (each important role models) in any healthy eating training will ensure that children receive consistent messages both at home and at school.
The Food Pyramid is the education tool used nationally and internationally to communicate the healthy eating message. The Food Pyramid should be used as the basis for healthy eating training. The Food Pyramid is a fun way to teach children about the different food groups and the nutrients in each group. The pyramid is divided into five shelves, each representing a different food group. Choosing a variety of foods from each of the bottom four main shelves ensures that children have a balanced and healthy diet. This document outlines the recommended servings for school lunch. The servings are then explained with examples of foods and serving sizes.

Healthy Eating the 'Pyramid Way' consists of:

- A healthy varied diet
- Adequate energy intake for growth and development
- Plenty of fruit and vegetables for vitamins, minerals and fibre
- Adequate calcium intake for healthy bones and teeth
- Adequate iron intake to prevent anaemia
- Adequate fluid intake – drink water frequently and/or choose tooth friendly drinks
- Regular eating pattern - not skipping meals

Food Pyramid Shelf Servings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOP SHELF</th>
<th>SPARINGLY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MEAT, FISH &amp; ALTERNATIVES</td>
<td>1 SERVING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MILK, CHEESE &amp; YOGURT</td>
<td>1 SERVING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRUIT &amp; VEGETABLES</td>
<td>1 OR MORE SERVINGS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BREAD, CEREALS &amp; POTATOES</td>
<td>2 OR MORE SERVINGS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bread, Cereals and Potatoes shelf (2 or more servings for lunch):

This food group is important to help meet children’s needs for growing, learning and playing. These foods provide energy as carbohydrate and should form the basis of all meals including school lunch and break. Include high fibre choices frequently.

- Bread (all types, plain or toasted) – sliced breads (brown, wholemeal, wholegrain, white), homemade breads (brown, wholemeal, white or brown soda), currant breads, french bread/stick, soda farls.
- Rolls of all sizes – brown, white, wholemeal, petit pains, burger buns
- Scones – wholemeal, brown, currant, white
- Pitta breads, tortilla wraps, bagels
- Crackers (preferably wholegrain/wholewheat)
- Pasta, spaghetti and rice – may be included in salad boxes
- Combination foods i.e. pizzas, quiche

One serving includes:

- 1 slice of bread
- 1 medium roll
- 2 crackers
- 1 small scone
- 2 tablespoons/3 dessertspoons cooked rice / pasta
- small serving of popcorn
Fruit and Vegetables shelf (1 or more servings for lunch):
These foods provide vitamins, minerals and fibre.

- Vegetables - cooked or raw
- Salad vegetables - e.g. lettuce, tomato, cucumber, sweetcorn, peppers, celery, carrot - include in sandwiches
- Vegetable sticks e.g. cucumber, carrots, celery, pepper (red, yellow, green)
- All fresh fruit e.g. apples, mandarins, satsumas, tangerines, peaches, pears, plums, bananas (try to buy in season and wash before school)
- Oranges - slice into 6-8 segments and wrap in clingfilm
- Kiwis - slice in half and wrap in clingfilm, or eat with teaspoon
- Dried fruit - raisins, sultanas, apricots, figs
- Unsweetened pure fruit juice

One serving is:
- 1 large piece of fruit, i.e. 1 apple, 1 orange, 1 banana
- 2 small pieces of fruit, i.e. 2 satsumas, 2 kiwis
- 100ml of unsweetened pure fruit juice (1 small carton = 200ml)
- 1/2 tin of fruit, in own juice
- 2 tablespoons/3 dessertspoons vegetables, i.e. carrots-chopped or grated
- 1 small salad, i.e. lettuce, tomato, cucumber, celery sticks

Milk, Cheese and Yoghurt shelf (1 serving for lunch):
These foods provide protein for growth and calcium for healthy bones and teeth. Milk is a healthy drink for school children - encourage schools to avail of the EU School Milk Scheme.

- Milk - all types include the same amount of calcium
- Cheese - all types including cubes, sticks, slices, triangles, spreads
- Yoghurt - all types

One serving is:
- 1 glass/mini carton of milk
- 1 yoghurt (125ml)
- 28g / 1 oz cheddar type cheese
- 2 processed cheese slices

Meat, Fish and Alternatives shelf (1 serving for lunch)
These foods provide protein for growth and red meat in particular is an important source of iron.

- Meat - lean beef, lamb, pork or ham
- Chicken or Turkey – sliced or chopped
- Eggs
- Fish – tinned, fresh
- Nuts – whole nuts are not suitable for children under 5 years old
- Peanut butter
- Cheese (not only listed on the dairy shelf but is also a source of protein)
- Textured Vegetable Protein (TVP), Tofu, Beans

One serving is:
- 56g/2oz meat, i.e. 2 slices cooked meat
- 56g/2oz chicken, i.e. 2 slices chicken/turkey breast
- 84g/3oz fish, e.g. tuna, salmon, mackerel, sardines
- 2 eggs – hard boiled, sliced or mashed
- 56g / 2oz cheddar cheese i.e. slices or cubes

Top shelf (sparingly)
Foods from this shelf can be high in fat/sugar and should be used sparingly. Chocolate, fizzy drinks, sweets, cakes, biscuits and savoury snacks i.e. crisps should only be eaten occasionally and should not replace important foods from other shelves of the pyramid. These foods may fill children quickly and reduce their appetite for more nutritious healthy food.

- Milk – all types include the same amount of calcium
- Cheese - all types including cubes, sticks, slices, triangles, spreads
- Yoghurt - all types

One serving is:
- 1 glass/mini carton of milk
- 1 yoghurt (125ml)
- 28g / 1 oz cheddar type cheese
- 2 processed cheese slices
**SECTION 4**

**THE HEALTHY LUNCHBOX: PACKED FULL OF GOODNESS**

Children need a wide variety of foods to help them grow, learn and play. A healthy lunchbox is an important part of the school day. Use the previous suggestions for each shelf of the food pyramid to pack a healthy balanced lunch box.

**Steps to a healthy lunch box**

- Encourage wholemeal or wholegrain varieties of breads, rolls, scones and crackers
- Use butter or spreads sparingly and use those low in saturated fat
- Include salad vegetables in sandwiches and salad boxes, e.g. lettuce, tomato, cucumber, carrot and use vegetable sticks
- Include at least one piece of fruit at lunch e.g. apple, orange, banana
- Encourage low fat milk or yoghurt with every lunch
- Ensure that meat, chicken, fish, egg or cheese is included as part of lunch
- Include a drink at lunch e.g. low fat milk, water, unsweetened pure fruit juice or diluted sugar free squash
- Using low fat dressings, sauces and relish can add variety and taste to sandwiches, rolls and salads

**Healthy lunch box – putting ideas into practice:**

- Wholemeal bread with cheese slice and tomato + 1 banana + sugar free squash
- Pitta bread with cooked ham, low-fat mayonnaise lettuce and cucumber + orange segments + milk to drink
- Burger bun with chicken, relish, lettuce and grated carrot + dried fruit + yoghurt + water to drink
- Toasted wholemeal bread with cooked beef, tomato and cucumber + small apple + milk to drink
- Cooked pasta with tuna, lettuce, tomato and carrot + 2 mandarins + yoghurt + unsweetened pure fruit juice
- Salad box with cooked rice, lettuce, tomato, cheese cubes, celery sticks, carrot sticks + dried fruit + water to drink
- White roll with mashed hard boiled egg, lettuce and cucumber + handful of grapes + sugar free squash/milk to drink.
- Wholemeal bap with lean grilled bacon, tomato and sweetcorn + peach + milk to drink
- Crackers with cheese slices, sliced peppers, grated carrot + apple and orange segments + water to drink
- Cooked rice with cooked peas, carrot and chicken pieces + dried fruit + unsweetened fruit juice
- Hummus sandwich + banana + unsweetened fruit juice

**Drinks**

It is important that children take in enough fluids during the day. Almost 2/3 of the body is made of water. If children do not drink enough water, they may become dehydrated, thirsty, tired and weak.

Drinks should always be included for lunch and break-time. Water and milk are the best choices and milk is also a valuable source of calcium, which is important for healthy bones and teeth. Unsweetened fruit juice/diluted sugar free squashes are also suitable drinks if taken with meals. Children should be encouraged to drink fluids with meals and not to fill up on drinks before meals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRINK</th>
<th>TOOTH FRIENDLY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WATER</td>
<td>GOOD CHOICE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MILK</td>
<td>GOOD CHOICE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DILUTED SUGAR FREE SQUASH</td>
<td>ONLY AT MEAL TIMES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNSWEETENED FRUIT JUICE</td>
<td>ONLY AT MEAL TIMES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRUIT DRINKS</td>
<td>NOT TOOTH FRIENDLY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ideas for ‘Breakfast on the Go’

Breakfast suggestions for eating on the way to school are preferable to no breakfast at all. Suggest the following:

- Piece of fresh fruit
- Carton unsweetened pure fruit juice
- Yoghurt
- Box of mini cereal - straight from the pack!
- Wholegrain cereal bars – check labels for lower sugar and lower fat choices
- Slice of toast/bread
- Small carton milk

After-school

After the long school day, children doing their homework may find it hard to concentrate and learn. All children need a snack after school to keep them satisfied until their evening meal. Schools may be interested in organising after school clubs to ensure that children have healthy snacks and the opportunity to do their homework.

The following list gives snack ideas from each of the bottom four shelves of the Food Pyramid

The Food Pyramid for Snacks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BREAD, CEREAL &amp; POTATOES SHELF</th>
<th>BREAKFAST CEREAL, BREAD, TOAST, ROLLS, CRACKERS, CRISPBREADS, BAGELS, SCONES, PLAIN BISCUITS, PLAIN POPCORN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FRUIT &amp; VEGETABLE SHELF</td>
<td>UNSWEETENED FRUIT JUICE, BANANA, APPLE, ORANGE, PEACH, SATSUMAS, PLUM, GRAPES, KIWI, PEAR, MELOM, PINEAPPLE, RAW CARROT STICKS, DRIED FRUIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MILK, CHEESE, YOGHURT SHELF</td>
<td>GLASS OF MILK, MILK ON CEREAL, UNSWEETENED MILK SHAKE, YOGHURT, CHEESE SLICE, CUBES OR SPREAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEAT, FISH AND ALTERNATIVES SHELF</td>
<td>SLICE OF COOKED MEAT, SMALL CHICKEN SANDWICH, SMALL EGG SANDWICH, BAKED BEANS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SECTION 6

VEGETARIAN FOODS & ALTERNATIVE DIETS

During healthy eating training sessions it may also be necessary to briefly address the following topics:

- VEGETARIAN EATING
- SPECIAL DIETS
- FOOD SAFETY

Within these guidelines each topic is only addressed briefly. For more information on any of these consult the organisations referenced at the end of this document.

Vegetarian Foods

Children have particularly high energy needs for growth and development. A vegetarian diet for children needs a little extra planning to ensure they are getting sufficient energy and nutrients to meet their requirements.

- It is important not to simply avoid meat products but to substitute them with nutritious alternatives such as milk, cheese, yoghurt, eggs, peas and beans, quorn, TVP, tofu.

- Nutrient rich foods such as milk, cheese and eggs can provide protein, vitamin A, calcium and zinc. Vegetarian and vegetable sources of protein, for example pulses (peas, beans and lentils) quorn, tofu should be provided at each meal.

- It is important to ensure that the child receives enough dietary iron from a meat free diet. Good sources of dietary iron include: fortified breakfast cereals, wholemeal, wholegrain and brown breads, brown rice, eggs, oily fish (sardines, salmon, trout, mackerel, pilchards), pulses (e.g. peas, beans, lentils) dark green leafy vegetables and dried fruit (sultanas, raisins, apricots, figs). Iron is more easily absorbed if the child has foods or drinks that are high in vitamin C at the same meal – for example fruits (oranges, mandarins, satsumas, kiwis), vegetables (tomatoes, etc) or juices (unsweetened orange juice, grapefruit juice). Tea and coffee reduce the absorption of dietary iron.

- Use the Food Pyramid as a guide, when planning a vegetarian lunch. As it is important to include 1 serving from the meat, fish and alternatives shelf, instead of meat, chicken, fish choose from the following alternatives: Beans, Peas, Lentils, Eggs, Cheese, Hummus, Nuts and nut butters, Tofu, Seeds, Textured Vegetable Protein (TVP)

- Nuts may not be suitable for those with history of allergy.

Special Diets

Parents/guardians should inform the school of their child’s special diet. This will ensure that teachers are aware of the child’s special diet. Diets followed by religious and ethnic groups and special diets such as gluten free, diabetic, milk free, nut free diets can be quite complex. Once teachers are aware of children’s special needs they can advise against swapping and sharing of food.

Food Safety at School

Food safety should always be addressed during any healthy eating training session to schools. For more information on this topic contact the Food Safety Promotions Board, The Food Safety Authority of Ireland, or your Health Boards Environmental Health Officer. See ‘Useful Contact List and Acknowledgements’ at end of this document.

CHECKLIST FOR TEACHERS

The following checklist can be used during training sessions with teachers. The adoption of a whole school approach to healthy eating ensures that healthy eating messages are part of every aspect of school life. The school classroom, Curriculum (S.P.H.E., Geography, Science, Maths etc.), playground, canteen, vending machine and shop provide the ideal setting to support and encourage healthy eating amongst children.
Consider the lunch environment
1. Is there enough time for children to enjoy lunch and have some physical activity at lunch time?
2. Are children encouraged to sit while eating?
3. Is lunchtime supervised?
4. Is there a designated area for eating?
5. Do/Could older children help younger children with lunch?
6. Are there handwashing facilities?
7. Is there a storage area for lunches?

Encourage healthy eating activities
1. If your school is interested in developing a school food policy you can contact a Health Promotion Officer or Community Dietitian in your local Health Board.
2. Build a food pyramid with the class using food models and empty packages. The school environment should support healthy eating initiatives. Display resources such as the Food Pyramid Poster and information leaflets in the classroom/school corridors. Available from Health Promotion Offices in Health Boards, see ‘Useful Contact List and Acknowledgements’ at end of this document.
3. Encourage healthier alternatives i.e. unsweetened juice in place of fizzy drinks, popcorn instead of crisps, fruit instead of sweets or chocolate. Consider bringing in examples of healthy foods to class for discussion in turn with SPHE and other classroom activities.
4. Incorporate discussions on food into other subjects such as History, Geography, English, Irish, P.E.
5. Explore as many practical activities as possible during the in-service training.

Create healthy eating initiatives
1. Have special focus on healthy eating on certain days during the school calendar. e.g. have a theme day such as fresh fruit day.
2. Have a healthy eating week and focus on healthy eating linked with SPHE and other classroom subjects.
3. Use national campaigns as opportunities to focus on healthy eating messages – for example National Healthy Eating Campaigns.

Other
1. Encourage parents and children to become involved in supporting healthy eating choices in school.
2. Have focus groups on healthy eating with children.
3. Provide support, resources and information to parents.
4. Ensure that safe drinking water is available in school to children.
5. Have a refrigerator available to children if possible.
6. Food hygiene guidelines should be observed when storing and handling food. For further information contact Food Safety Authority of Ireland & Food Safety Promotions Board.

Nuts may not be suitable for those with a history of allergy.
Acknowledgements

The Health Promotion Unit would like to acknowledge members of the Working Group:

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