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February 12, 2026

MEMORANDUM

TO: Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Sponsors

FROM: Aimee F. Beam, MS, RD *AB*
Director, Nutrition Programs

RE: **2026 Operational Memo #9**
Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030 – Eat Real Food

On February 11, 2026, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service issued a memorandum to Child Nutrition Program Regional Offices and State Agency Directors: *SP 02-2026, CACFP 01-2026, SFSP 01-2026: "Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030 – Eat Real Food."* This is a follow to the January 7th, 2026, release of the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030 \(Guidelines\)](#). These Guidelines place real food, defined as whole, nutrient-dense, and naturally occurring, back at the center of our diets. The [Guidelines and the New Pyramid](#) are available online.

This memo is intended to inform Program operators of the new guidelines and encourage Program operators to become familiar with these recommendations and consider how they could be incorporated into current meals and snacks. There are no changes to guidance, meal patterns, or other nutrition-related requirements at this time.

Attachment: SP 02-2026, CACFP 01-2026, SFSP 01-2026

Cc: DDOE Nutrition Team



Food and Nutrition Service

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

DATE: February 11, 2026

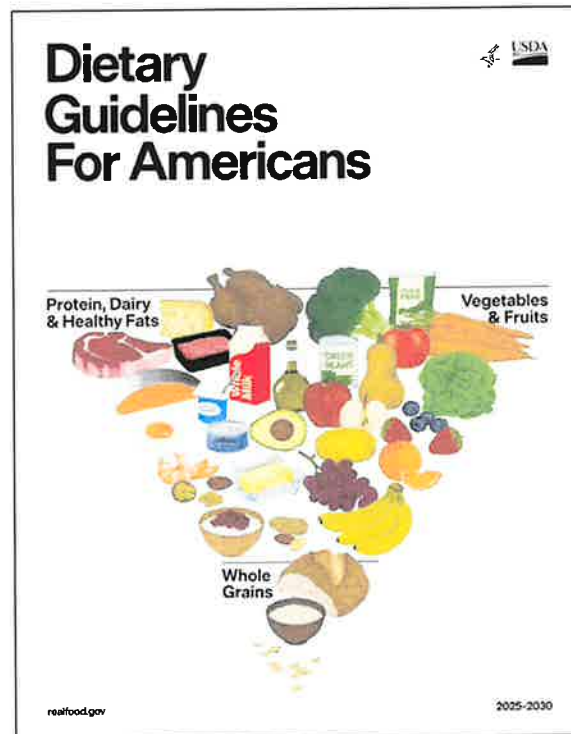
MEMO CODE: SP 02-2026, CACFP 01-2026, SFSP 01-2026

SUBJECT: Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030 – Eat Real Food

TO: Regional Directors, Child Nutrition Programs, All Regions
State Directors, Child Nutrition Programs, All States

On January 7, 2026, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030](#) (*Guidelines*). These *Guidelines* call on every American to eat more real food.

Farmers, ranchers, health care professionals, insurers, educators, community leaders, industry, and lawmakers across all levels of government are encouraged to join in this critical effort. America's future depends on what we grow, what we serve, and what we choose to eat. These *Guidelines* place whole, nutrient-dense food back at the center of our diets. You can access the new edition, the *New Pyramid*, and the [daily servings guide](#) at <https://realfood.gov/>.



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In summary, these *Guidelines* have been updated by:

- Prioritizing a variety of high quality, nutrient-dense protein foods at every meal from animal sources, including eggs, poultry, seafood, and red meat, as well as a variety of plant-sourced protein foods including beans, peas, lentils, legumes, nuts, seeds, and soy;
- Encouraging a variety of dairy fat options, including whole and reduced-fat milk;
- Promoting the consumption of vegetables and fruits of all types, including fresh, frozen, canned, juiced, and dried, throughout the day;
- Incorporating healthy fats from whole foods such as meats, poultry, eggs, seafood, nuts, seeds, full-fat dairy, olives, and avocados;
- Prioritizing fiber-rich whole grains while significantly reducing refined grains, especially those high in added sugars; and
- Limiting certain highly processed foods, added sugars, and refined carbohydrates.

USDA recognizes the important role that child nutrition program operators play in serving nutritious meals and snacks to the children in their care, and that these meal programs are essential to providing the healthiest meals and snacks most children receive each day.¹ While release of the new *Guidelines* does not immediately impact program requirements, Secretary of Agriculture, Brooke L. Rollins, strongly encourages child nutrition program operators to familiarize themselves with the key recommendations and consider how these *Guidelines* can be incorporated into program meals and snacks to promote healthy outcomes and healthy families. These *Guidelines*

¹ Liu J, Micha R, Li Y, Mozaffarian D. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. JAMA. April 12, 2021. Available at [https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2778453?utm_source=For The Media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_term=040921](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2778453?utm_source=For%20The%20Media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_term=040921)

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provide operators the opportunity to critically evaluate how their menus can be updated to prioritize food options that promote consumption of whole, nutrient-dense protein foods, dairy, vegetables, fruits, healthy fats, and whole grains while limiting highly processed foods, added sugars, and refined carbohydrates. State agencies and program operators are invited to share their creative ideas with their Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Regional Offices, as they could become the model for other States and USDA.

This historic release kicks off a multi-year effort to update USDA's child nutrition programs based on this guidance, including through rulemaking and education. FNS is actively developing a proposed rule to update child nutrition program nutrition standards and meal requirements in the Code of Federal Regulations to align with the goals of the updated *Guidelines*. USDA looks forward to receiving stakeholder feedback on proposed changes to program requirements through the rulemaking and public comment process. Until a final rule implementing changes to meal requirements is complete, all operators should continue meeting current requirements while working towards providing the healthiest food options to program participants. Additionally, USDA is developing an education campaign to accompany this new edition to support healthy eating outside of school where intakes need dramatic improvements to drive meaningful change. We look forward to continuing our work together to support healthy choices, healthy outcomes, and healthy families.

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State agencies are reminded to distribute this information to Program operators immediately. Program operators should direct any questions regarding this memorandum to the appropriate State agency. State agencies should direct questions to the appropriate FNS Regional Office.

Sincerely,

TINA
NAMIAN

Digitally signed by TINA
NAMIAN
Date: 2026.02.11
09:15:37 -05'00'

Tina Namian
Deputy Associate Administrator
Child Nutrition Programs
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Attachment

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Child Nutrition Program Resources

The resources below are some of the many that USDA offers to support program operators in serving healthy meals that are consistent with the goals of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

Institute of Child Nutrition: The USDA-funded Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN) is a national center dedicated to applied research, education and training, and technical assistance for child nutrition programs. ICN provides training to child nutrition professionals with an emphasis on culinary skills and scratch cooking.

Team Nutrition Training Grants: Team Nutrition Training Grants play an important role in helping State agencies deliver training and nutrition education that support the USDA child nutrition programs. New grant opportunities will be available this year.

National School Lunch Equipment Assistance Grants: The National School Lunch Program Equipment Assistance Grant provides funds for schools to support the purchase of food service equipment. By enabling schools to modernize kitchens and acquire appropriate equipment, the program helps them serve more whole foods and prepare meals from scratch, fostering strategies that encourage healthy choices for students. Visit the following website for available grant opportunities:

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/fm/grant-opportunities>.

Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs: The Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs (FBG) assists schools in planning their food purchases. The FBG also includes interactive tools, such as the Recipe Analysis Workbook, which calculates the meal contribution for standardized recipes using whole foods.

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Crediting Tip Sheets for Child Nutrition Programs: The Crediting Tip Sheets are easy-to-use references for program operators on how foods credit towards a reimbursable meal with a focus on serving whole foods in schools.

Nutrient Analysis Protocols Manual: The Nutrient Analysis Protocols: How to Analyze Menus for USDA's School Meals Programs helps school nutrition professionals assess the nutrient composition of foods served in school meals using standardized recipes.

Healthy Meals Incentives: The Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative aims to improve nutritional quality of school meals through food systems transformation, school food authority recognition and technical assistance, the generation and sharing of innovative ideas and tested practices, and grants. Many subgrant projects aim to increase scratch cooking and procurement of local agriculture.

Nibbles for Health: Nutrition Newsletters for Parents of Young Children: Nibbles for Health is a nutrition education series for parents of young children that encourages fruits and vegetables and snacks with real food and less sugar.

Team Nutrition Cooks: Team Nutrition Cooks! is a series of cooking-based nutrition activities for out-of-school and afterschool programs focused on kid-friendly recipes using real food.

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