



Menu Planning: How to Plan Your Menu

Planning menus for your summer site that are budget-friendly, appetizing and nutritious can seem daunting. But, with careful planning you can prepare and serve meals that meet the needs of your site and participating children. In this section, you'll find tips on how to plan your menu, whether you should self-prepare meals or vend meals and information on procurement.

Self-Preparation vs. Vended Meals

While the sponsor provides the meals, a site must decide which meal service model will work best for them: self-preparation or vended meals.

Self-preparation means meals are prepared on site by trained staff and/or volunteers. This is known as a self-prep site. When preparing meals on site, staff may either buy ingredients and prepare a meal on-site or buy already prepared foods and reheat it (if needed), or a combination of both. Self-prep sites must have the equipment and resources needed to prepare meals safely. This usually means having a commercial grade kitchen that meets State and local health codes. An advantage to self-prep sites is that they have more control over the type and variety of food they serve.

Vended meals are meals purchased already prepared from an approved, licensed vendor. This is known as a vended site. Vended sites have meals fully prepared delivered to them so little to no food preparation is needed at the site. Sponsors are responsible of finding a vendor for their site. See the section below on Procurement for more details about this process.

It is up to the site to decide which model works best for them and to make sure children at their summer site are receiving healthy, tasty meals.

Procurement

Procurement is a multi-step process for obtaining the most responsive goods and services that meet your needs. All procurements in the SFSP of food, supplies, goods and other services with program funds by sponsors must be competitive and meet all SFSP procurement standards. The procurement process ensures fairness, makes the best use of federal, state and local funds, saves money and obtains the best products and services for your site.

When preparing and serving meals on a large scale and procurement is needed, a food specification will need to be developed. A food specification is a detailed list of the desired characteristics of a food product. How you plan to use the food determines both the form and quality you should buy. You should:



- Provide your supplier with clear specifications for each food item ordered; and
- Check to see that the food meets the specifications and is in good condition when it is delivered.

For more information on procurement, contact your State Agency

How to Plan Your Menu

Menu planning means thinking about what foods to serve together. Good menu planning for summertime involves multiple considerations, including:

- Children’s nutritional needs and taste preferences;
- Where meals are served (summer site location);
- Food costs;
- Food safety and handling;
- Equipment, and
- Labor.

Where to Start

The best place to start when menu planning is to decide on a main dish or entrée; consider a source of protein from the meat or meat alternate group. Or, think of main dishes that feature grains, vegetables or fruits such as tacos, burritos or a salad. Once you know what the main dish will be, choose a combination of fruits and vegetables that go together and complement the main dish.

To help make sure the meal is appealing to children, be sure the meal you plan:

- Is colorful (how many colors of the rainbow are in the meal?);
- Has a variety of shapes, textures (crunchy, smooth, etc.) and tastes (sweet, salty, etc.);
- Meets children’s food preferences; and
- Meets the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) meal pattern requirements.

You can use the Summer Menu Checklist in the SFSP Nutrition Guidance for Sponsors handbook to see how well your menu meets these topics. A link to the Nutrition Guidance Sponsors handbook is at the bottom of this section.

If you have on-site cooking facilities you might want to use standardized recipes. A standardized recipe is a recipe that gives the same good results every time. It provides a list of measured ingredients and set of directions for preparation and service of the food. These are necessary to prepare menus of consistent quality, portion size and nutritive value.



What Else to Consider

Along with considering what foods would be appealing to children it is important to think about costs, budget, preparation time, labor and equipment when planning a menu. Additionally, make sure you are considering extra needs and resources, such as ice, straws and garbage bags when planning your menu.

- Calculate food costs
You can calculate food costs by following these steps:
 1. Select recipes for the meal;
 2. Determine the serving size;
 3. Determine how many meals to prepare;
 4. Adjust the recipes for number of servings;
 5. Calculate the amount of food needed for the total number of meals;
 6. Estimate the total food cost.
- Check your budget
Once you calculate the estimated food cost of the menu, compare it to your food budget. If the cost is too high for the food budget replace some of the foods in the menu with less costly ones or try other recipes.
- Check your inventory
Based on the estimated amounts of food you'll need to prepare the menus, you should determine the amount of food you already have in your storerooms and refrigerators.
- Check your labor and equipment
Based on the equipment you have and the amount of staff at your summer site you can schedule production time, equipment usage and develop work schedules. It's important to find a balance between being over-scheduled and under-scheduled!

When planning your menus include schedules for food purchases, cost control and food preparation time and delivery.

Cycle Menus

It's almost impossible to plan a new menu every day on the day of service. Instead, try planning your menus in advance. One way to do this is to develop a cycle menu. A cycle menu is a set of planned menus that are repeated in the same order for a period of time, usually 2, 3 or 4 weeks. The menu is different during every day during the cycle. A cycle menu offers variety and is flexible to allow for substitutions. It is the master plan in menu planning!



Some tips for adjusting your cycle menu include:

- Replace foods that are not available;
- Celebrate birthdays and other special occasions;
- Introduce new foods and try new recipes;
- Take advantage of seasonal foods or deals;
- Use leftovers wisely; and
- Consider children's food accessibility.

When introducing new foods into the menu, you can host a taste test to encourage children to try the new, healthy foods. You can test one food item, a new recipe or compare new and familiar foods. Remember that it may take several tastes and exposures to the new food before children like it.

It is also helpful to take a second look at your menu about half way through the summer and think about how much children like the meals. Do more children show up on days when certain meals are served? Or the opposite, do less children show up on days when certain meals are served? By doing this you can adjust your menu to appeal to children's taste preferences and increase your site's participation.

USDA Resources

Regulations and Policies

- **SFSP Procurement standards, 7 CFR 225.17**
http://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/retrieveECFR?gp=&SID=b39b4490ac1b2ddf51e5ba68d268ef63&n=pt7.4.225&r=PART&ty=HTML#se7.4.225_117

Handbooks and Other Tools

- **Nutrition Guidance for Sponsors**
This handbook made just for sponsors includes a summer menu checklist, record keeping worksheets, sample cycle menu, snack ideas.
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/NutritionGuide.pdf>
- **The Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs (FBG)**
A guide that helps sponsors buy the right type and amount of food and determine how much each food contributes towards the meal pattern requirements.
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/foodbuying-guide-child-nutrition-programs>
- **Food Buying Guide Calculator for Child Nutrition Programs**
The online interactive Food Buying Guide Calculator for Child Nutrition Programs has individual calculators for each of the 6 food groups outlined in the FBG and a self-tutorial instructional video. <http://fbg.nfsmi.org/>



Summer Meals Toolkit

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

- **Healthy Meals Resource System**
The Healthy Meals Resource System is an online information center for USDA Child Nutrition Programs. <http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/menu-planning/usda-food-commodity-resources>
- **Team Nutrition**
Find recipes, menu planning, food preparation, and nutrition materials in the Team Nutrition Library. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/team-nutrition>
- **USDA What's Cooking? Recipe Bowl**
A one-stop shop for recipes created for USDA food programs. <http://www.whatscooking.fns.usda.gov/>
- **Taste Testing and Evaluating Recipes**
This page includes ballots to use during taste tests so children can share their thoughts on new foods they've tried. <http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/recipes/taste-testing-and-evaluating-recipes>

Toolkit Pages:

- **Menu Planning: How to Serve a Reimbursable Meal**
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cnd/SMT-ReimbursableMeal.pdf>
- **Menu Planning: Healthy Summer Meals**
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cnd/SMT-HealthySummerMeals.pdf>
- **Meal Service Best Practices**
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cnd/SMT-MealServiceBestPractices.pdf>

Partner Organizations Resources

- **2013 Procurement Training**, Alaska Department of Education
https://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/cnp/pdf/2013_sfsp_procurement_training.pdf
- **First Choice: A Purchasing Systems Manual for School Food Service**, This resource from the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) includes a section on menu systems and planning.
<http://www.nfsmi.org/documentlibraryfiles/PDF/20111129111739.pdf>
- **USDA Online Procurement Training**, by NFSMI
This free online procurement training was developed by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service to help State agencies understand the procurement requirements of the Child Nutrition Programs.
<http://www.nfsmi.org/Templates/TemplateDefault.aspx?qs=cEIEPTEzNQ>
- **Menu Planning for Self-Prep or Vended Sites**, by Cal-Pro-NET at San Jose State University
Find tips on how to make sure all SFSP meal pattern requirements are met when menu planning with this resource.
http://www.nufs.sjsu.edu/calpronet/modules_SFSP_2014/SFSP_Module_5_Men



Summer Meals Toolkit

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

[u Planning.pdf](#)

- **A Basic Guide to Taste Tests** from Food & Fun.
This resource provides tips and things to keep in mind when hosting a taste test.
<http://www.foodandfun.org/?p=learn/staff/activities&subject=A+Basic+Guide+to+Taste+Tests&unit=About>

Additional Information

Sponsors and the general public should contact the appropriate State agency for additional guidance. State agencies should contact their FNS Regional Office for additional guidance.

List of FNS Regional Offices: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns-regional-offices>

List of State Agencies: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Contacts/StateDirectory.htm>

USDA and its recipient institutions share responsibility for compliance and oversight to ensure good stewardship of Federal Funds.



Summer Food Rocks!

Summer Meals Toolkit

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.