

CHILD NUTRITION LABELS 101

CN

Child Nutrition (CN) Labels 101

This guidance applies to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) meal patterns for grades K-12 and preschoolers (ages 1-4) in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Seamless Summer Option (SSO) of the NSLP, and Afterschool Snack Program (ASP) of the NSLP.

Are you confused by child nutrition (CN) labels? Do you know when you need to get one? Which foods may have a CN label, or how to use them? You are not alone. CN labels can be intimidating but also highly useful. Our partners at the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN) have some great resources to guide you through the basics of the CN label!

What Are CN Labels?

CN labels tell us how a product contributes to the meal pattern. The manufacturer voluntarily submits their product to the USDA to get a CN label. As a CN label statement clearly identifies the contribution of a product toward the meal pattern requirements, it protects programs from exaggerated claims about a product. CN labeling makes menu writing easier and gives peace of mind during audits.

Which Foods Are Eligible for a CN Label?

CN labels are available only for main dish entrees that provide at least ½ ounce equivalent of the meat/meat alternates component of the USDA's meal patterns for the Child Nutrition Programs. Examples include beef patties, cheese or meat pizzas, meat or cheese and bean burritos, egg rolls, and breaded fish portions.

CN labels also typically indicate the contribution of other meal components that are part of these products. For example, CN-labeled pizza may list contributions to the meat/meat alternates, grains, and vegetables components; and CN-labeled breaded chicken nuggets may list contributions to the meat/meat alternates and grains components.

Benefits of Using CN-Labeled Products

A CN label statement clearly identifies the contribution of a commercial product toward the meal pattern requirements, based on the USDA's evaluation of the product's formulation. CN labeling provides a warranty that the product contributes to the meal pattern requirements, as printed on the label.

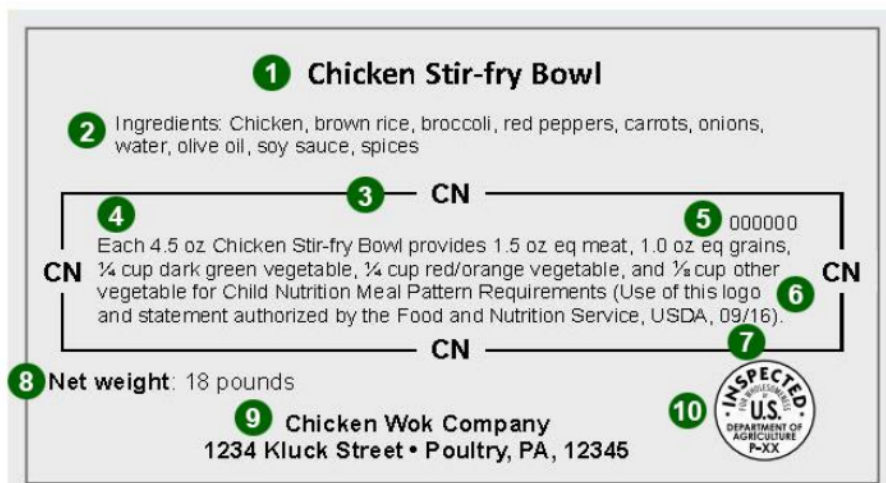
Child Nutrition (CN) Labels 101

Identifying CN Labels

The CN label is found on the product packaging and will contain the required elements below.

- The CN logo, which is a distinct border with “CN” on each side, surrounding the meal pattern contribution statement.
- The meal pattern contribution statement, which provides the specific crediting information for the serving.
- A six-digit product identification number, which is assigned by the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) of the USDA.
- The USDA Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) authorization statement: “Use of this logo and statement authorized by the Food and Nutrition Service, USDA.”
- The month and year of AMS approval (listed after the FNS authorization statement).
- Other required label elements, including the product name, ingredients statement, inspection legend, company signature/address line, and net weight.

Table 1. Sample CN label



- 1 Product name
- 2 Ingredients statement
- 3 CN logo
- 4 Meal pattern contribution statement
- 5 Six-digit product identification number
- 6 FNS authorization statement
- 7 Month and year of AMS approval
- 8 Net weight
- 9 Company signature/address line
- 10 Inspection legend

Child Nutrition (CN) Labels 101

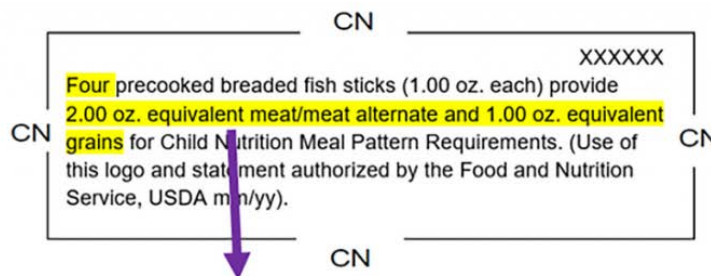
Where Do I Find CN Labels?

You will find CN labels on the product's package and, most often, on foods purchased through a large food distributor. You can also find CN labels through K-12 Channel or product lines. Items purchased in grocery stores generally do not include a CN label, and not all commercially prepared combination food items will have one.

How Do I Use a CN Label?

Compare information from the CN label to the [NSLP & SBP Meal Pattern](#) minimum requirements to know how much to serve each child. Refer to the graphic below that shows the number of fish sticks to serve to each child in each age group at lunch or supper based on the sample CN label.

Additionally, some CN labeled food products require a large portion size to meet minimum meat/meat alternate meal pattern serving sizes. Be sure to check CN labels for serving sizes to determine if the product is suitable for your program.



Ages	Min. Meal Pattern Requirements	Crediting Info From CN Label	Serving Size at Lunch/Supper	Meal Component Amts per Serving	Amt Meets Meal Pattern Reqs
Grades K-5	1 oz M/MA 1 oz eq Grains	4 fish sticks = 2 oz eq M/MA 1 oz eq Grains	4 fish sticks	2 oz M/MA 1 oz eq Grains	✓
Grades 6-8	1 oz M/MA 1 oz eq Grains				✓
Grades 9-12	2 oz M/MA 2 oz eq Grains		4 fish sticks 1 dinner roll	2 oz M/MA 2 oz eq Grains	✓

Are CN Labeled Products More Nutritious or Higher Quality?

Not necessarily. A CN label does not mean the product is healthier, more nutritious, or higher quality than a similar product without a CN label. A CN label also does not mean the product is safer to eat or free of pathogens or allergens. CN labels are mainly used on processed meats and meat alternate products. To be sure you are serving high-quality, nutritious menu items, it is best to make meals from scratch.

Child Nutrition (CN) Labels 101

Do I Have to Keep CN Labels on File?

NSLP and SBP facilities must be able to document the meal pattern contribution of commercially processed foods served at meals and snacks. A CN label must be on file for all processed meats/meat alternates and commercially prepared combination food items to credit them to the meal pattern. There are three options for keeping documentation of CN labeled foods.

- Original scanned CN label cut from the product package for electronic filing
- Photograph of the CN label attached to the product packaging
- Photocopy of the CN label removed from the product package
- Manufacturer documentation from a website or product guide

CN labels must be visible and readable. The CN label for a specific product cannot be used for a different product. When re-purchasing a product, ensure the product that is re-purchased matches the CN label on file. Note that the CN label on file should be the most current CN label.

What if I Cannot Find a CN Labeled Product?

Option 1: Contact the manufacturer for a Product Formulation Statement (PFS). The PFS tells how the creditable ingredients in the product contribute to the meal pattern. Refer to [USDA's PFS Tip Sheet](#) for more information before adding items to your menu.

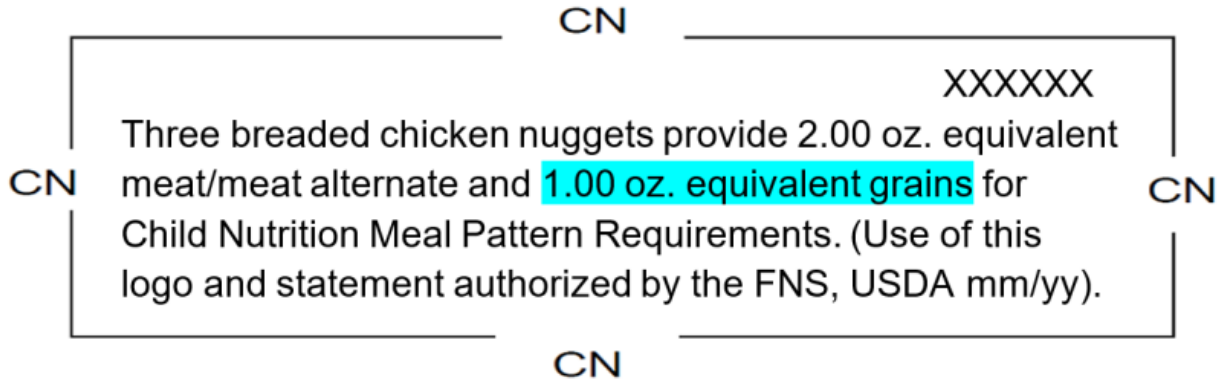
Option 2: Make the product from scratch using a [Standardized Recipe](#). This is an easy way to make sure you are serving creditable foods. More importantly, you control what goes into the product and can make a healthy version of it. Unsure of how a food item credits? Use the USDA's [Food Buying Guide](#) to determine how a food item yields, its crediting information, and its contribution towards the meal pattern requirements.

Child Nutrition (CN) Labels 101

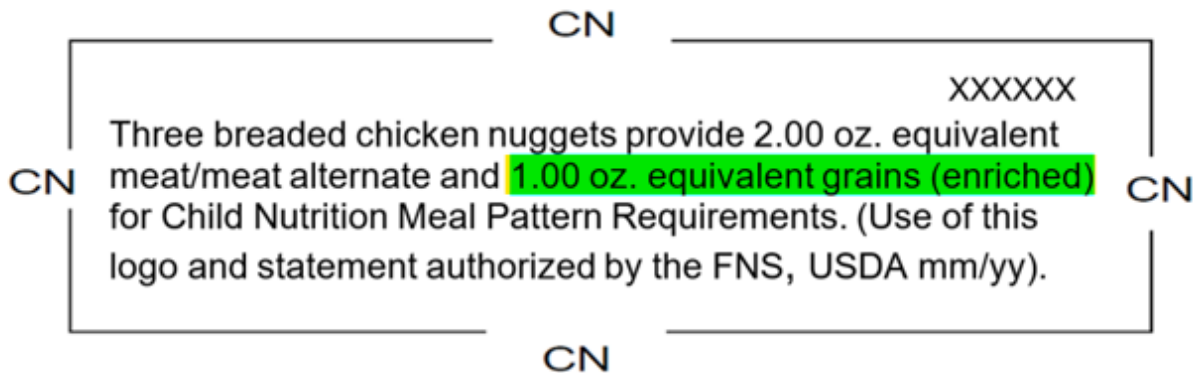
Are CN Labeled Products Whole Grain-Rich?

If the CN labeled main dish has a breading or grain, the CN label will tell you information about how the product counts as a grain and whether it is whole grain-rich or not.

Products that meet the whole grain-rich criteria will have the following language on the CN label:



Products that have mostly enriched grain ingredients (e.g., enriched wheat flour) and are NOT whole grain-rich will have the following language on the CN label:



Meal Pattern Contribution of CN Labels

CN labels indicate the meal pattern contribution of meat/meat alternates and other components (such as grains, vegetables, and fruits) in one serving of the product. CN labels do not include milk component crediting. Guidance for each component on a CN label is summarized below.

Meats/Meat alternates Contribution

A CN-labeled product lists the serving's meat/meat alternates contribution in ounce equivalents (oz eq). Quantities for the meat/meat alternates component are indicated as oz eq in the [NSLP meal pattern for grades K-12](#), and as ounces in the ASP meal pattern. The SBP meal pattern does not require meat/meat alternates. The amount that credits as 1 oz eq or 1 ounce of meat/meat alternate is the same.

Child Nutrition (CN) Labels 101

Grains Contribution

A CN-labeled product that contains a grain portion includes one of two crediting terms to indicate if the product credits as whole grain-rich (WGR) or enriched. The term “oz eq grains” on the CN label indicates that the product meets the WGR criteria. The term “oz eq grains (enriched)” means the grain portion of the product is primarily made from enriched grains and credits toward the grains component but does not meet the WGR criteria.

The WGR requirement applies to the NSLP and SBP meal patterns for grades K-12. In the ASP, the meal pattern for grades K-12 for grains is at least enriched grains are served with recommendation to serve WG/WGR items when grains are planned.

Vegetables Contribution

A CN-labeled product that contains vegetables lists the serving’s contribution to the five vegetable subgroups in cups. These subgroups include dark green, red/orange, beans and peas (legumes), starchy, and other. For additional guidance, refer to FDACS resource, [Vegetable Subgroups](#).

The vegetable subgroups are required only in the NSLP meal patterns for grades K-12. However, for best nutrition, SFAs are encouraged to frequently offer the vegetable subgroups in other meals and snacks.

Fruits Contribution

A CN-labeled product that contains fruit lists the serving’s contribution to the fruits component in cups.

Resources:

- USDA CN Labeling Program <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/labeling-program>
- USDA/USDC Authorized Labels and Manufactures
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/labeling/usdausdc-authorized-labels-and-manufacturers>
- FDACS Child Nutrition (CN) Label/Product Formulation Statements
<https://www.fdacs.gov/Food-Nutrition/Nutrition-Programs/National-School-Lunch-Program/Menu-Planning-and-Meal-Service/Child-Nutrition-CN-Label-Product-Formulation-Statements>



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