

EXPLORING USDA'S DIETARY SPECIFICATIONS ASSESSMENT TOOL

Guidance and Tips

WHAT IS THE DSAT?

- The Dietary Specifications Assessment Tool (DSAT) helps state agencies evaluate food purchasing, menu planning, meal preparation, and meal service practices at participating schools/program sites during a School Meals Administrative Review (SMAR). This tool assesses how select nutrients are available to students in the school setting beyond menu planning factors.
- The process “holistically” assesses and evaluates how calories, saturated fats, sodium, and added sugars are made available to students during school meal services, including lunch and, when applicable, breakfast.
- During the SMAR, the completed DSAT “scores” help pinpoint potential areas of improvement. Less favorable scores help guide the Nutrition Review by identifying where standard processes and procedures should be updated based on current data.

1. PURCHASING PRACTICES

It is expected that bid specifications and purchasing guides include terms that address sodium, fats, and grains to help support compliance with NSLP meal pattern requirements and encourage healthy food procurement.

NUTRIENT SPECIFICATION TERMS & COMPARISONS

Sodium (Salt)

- Reduced: 25% less than standard product
- Low: Less than 40mg per serving

Fats

- Reduced: 25% less fat than standard product
- Low: Less than 3g per serving
- Light: 50% less fat or 1/3 less calories than standard product

Grains

- Whole Grain (100% WG)
- Whole Grain Rich (≥ 50% WG + any enriched grain)
- Enriched (refined, nutrients added)

DOCUMENTATION & CHECKLISTS

- ☐ Nutrition Facts
- ☐ Ingredient Lists
- ☐ CN Labels
- ☐ Product Formulation Statements

Always verify that product labels support claims of reduced sodium or low fat through documented information – a key step in the DSAT process.

2. ELEVATING FOOD SERVICE PRACTICES

Choose Fresh & Frozen Over Processed

- Evaluate menu plans each week and look to set 3 or 4 week cycles that incorporate a mix of fresh, frozen, canned, and dried foods, planning regular sodium products only a few times each week.
- Processed canned foods generally contain higher amounts of sodium. Consideration is needed for selecting canned products marketed as “reduced” or “low” sodium as part of purchasing standards when canned foods are used. Opting for fresh and frozen ingredients does offer the lowest sodium content and helps menu planners benefit from in-season discounts, fresher textures, and bolder colors and flavor options.
- Prioritize fresh produce and meats from local suppliers or seasonal vendors.

Be Salt Smart & Spice It Up

- Always choose seasonings and condiments labeled as lower sodium or sodium-free when available.
- Add herbs and spices often and use salt as a finishing touch in select dishes rather than the base of your flavor profile. Create layered, vibrant taste profiles with a variety of herbs, spices, and aromatics such as garlic, lemon zest, and basil. This approach ensures that flavor is enhanced without overloading dishes with sodium.

Flavor Foundation

- Enhance cooked brown rice and whole grain cereals with just a hint of salt and incorporate fresh or dried spices for more visual and taste appeal.
- For fresh and plain potato flake-based recipes use some but rely less on salt for flavor.
- Season fresh (raw) meat or poultry with minimal salt before cooking, allowing the natural flavors to develop and shine through.

3. MEAL SERVICE PRACTICES

Seasoning and condiments:

- Purchase bulk seasonings and condiments, then divide them into pre-portioned servings in-house.
- Equip self-service stations with pre-packaged cups accompanied by clear instructions on the recommended quantity per meal.
- Clearly communicate any additional a la carte costs if extra servings are taken.

NAVIGATING THE DSAT

Understanding the Rating Scale:

- 1 – Always:** Meets the criterion every day or on every meal day.
- 2 – Most:** Meets the standard on most days (3-4 days per week).
- 3 – Some:** Meets the standard only occasionally (1-2 days per week).
- 4 – Never:** The practice is not in place at all.
- N/A – Not Applicable:** Use when a specific item isn't relevant to the site.

EXPLORING THE DETAILS OF THE DSAT QUESTIONS

1 NUTRIENT SPECIFICATIONS - DAIRY FOODS FOCUS

Questions 1-3: Assess whether purchasing guidelines and specifications prioritize selecting items with lower saturated fat and sodium content, with an initial focus on milk and dairy products as a starting point for evaluating compliant meals. Additional written processes should be implemented to further evaluate nutrients, including saturated fat, sodium, added sugars and calories across multiple products.

Tip: Check bid specifications and vendor agreements to verify that they explicitly call out these healthy criteria.

2 PORTION & PRODUCT CONTROL

Questions 4-6, 22: Examine if cheese (regular and reduced fat) is portion-controlled and whether non-creditable cheese products are used appropriately and limited to specific recipe applications. Also assess whether condiments are portion-controlled and if reduced-fat, reduced-sodium options are used.

Tip: Look for evidence of portion control – such as pre-packaged servings or in-school portioned servings.

3 SODIUM & VEGETABLE PREPARATION

Questions 7-8: Check that soups and vegetables are prepared in a low or reduced sodium format, not relying on canned versions with regular sodium levels.

Tip: Compare ingredient lists and nutritional labels to confirm the use of low sodium or lowest sodium items.

4 PROCESSED MEATS & EXTRAS

Questions 9, 10, and 21: Assess the frequency with which processed items—such as hot dogs, luncheon meats, pickles, and croutons—as well as non-reimbursable extras like bacon, potato chips, and ice cream are offered.

Tip: Evaluate luncheon meats for quality and cost-per-ounce equivalent serving, selecting the lowest sodium product.

5 FRUITS, DESSERTS & CONDIMENTS

Questions 11-13: Evaluate added sugar in fruit and grain items, favoring fresh and lower added sugar fruits over fruits canned in heavy syrup, and limiting the number of grain-based desserts that are offered.

Tip: A comparison chart of fresh versus processed options can be an effective visual reminder.

6 CULINARY TECHNIQUE & RECIPE STANDARDIZATION

Questions 14-16, 19-20: Focus on cooking methods (e.g., substituting seasonings for salt, using liquid oil over butter or margarine, stir frying, baking, and roasting over deep fat frying) and the availability and usage of standardized recipes that help guarantee consistent food products and portion sizes.

Tip: Check for kitchen protocol manuals or posted recipes that reflect these standards.

7 EQUIPMENT & SERVICE DETAILS

Questions 17-18, 23-25: Determine whether practices such as using deep fat fryers are in place, how and where ingredients like butter or salt are offered (serving line, condiment station, on tables), and if larger portions or bonus items are being served.

Tip: A site walk-through or observational checklist can help verify compliance with these practices.



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