

Menus Made Easy

Wildwood CACFP Training, January 2019

Creating well-planned and varied menus provide nutrition to support health and growth while also incorporating seasonal foods at affordable prices. Planning menus in advance can save you time and reduce your grocery spending.

Obviously, you still have to cook or create the foods on your menu but having a plan in place allows you to know which meat to take out of the freezer ahead of time, the staples to stock up on, or what fresh fruits and veggies to add to your grocery list for the week ahead.

As part of this training you'll learn helpful tips to create your own menus. We've even included a template to use as you begin to plan your menus and suggested food lists to get your creativity flowing. There are also many ideas and calendar style grids online to download for free. If you choose to use internet option, be sure to use only reputable sources to avoid troublesome computer viruses or malware.

If you have one area of the menu that is particularly challenging, then that area is likely the best place to start. For care providers accommodating clients with food allergies or sensitivities in one or more food groups, that is where you'll want to focus your menu planning first. For most people the meat/meat alternate is a good place to begin menu planning. Give some thought to the protein foods you typically serve on a regular basis. These might include beef, poultry, pork, fish, beans or lentils, dairy foods like cheese or yogurt, and nuts or seeds. If you serve less healthy foods, like processed or cured meats or convenience foods like chicken nuggets, this may provide an opportunity to improve overall nutrition by cutting back on them.

Note: Having a Special Diet Statement/Medical Statement signed by the client's doctor on file allows you to substitute foods that may not be creditable under normal circumstances to meet the needs of this person.



Introducing new Foods

Consider introducing your group to a new fruit or vegetable each month, and then offer it several times to reinforce the idea that new foods are part of our regular pattern. Researchers say it may take more than 20 interactions with a new food before a child will accept it on their plate. Even then, it does not mean they will like it. By introducing new foods on a regular basis, you set the example that it is okay and even normal to try new things. When offering new foods, you could ask children if they “Love it”, “Like it”, or “Don’t like it yet”. The reasoning behind this easy trick is that you set the expectation that tastes can change and that a child may like this food the next time they try it.

Meat/Meat Alternates

It is common to serve a different meat/meat alternate each day of the week. You could follow a pattern like Meatless Monday, Turkey Tuesday, Pork Wednesday, Chicken Thursday and Fish on Friday. This type of protein food rotation is built with

variety in mind, but also follows a pattern that you can easily plan for throughout the year to meet your seasonal tastes and cooking style. Rotating protein sources also introduces children to a mix of flavors and textures as they learn to eat table food, which may help to reduce picky eating and texture issues related to food as they grow older.



The Meatless Monday aspect has many options that you can “plug-in” to the menu template, like cheese soups or sandwiches, beans as a side or main dish, eggs, tofu and more. When you choose to serve beef, it can be ground, roast, stew/soup, or other cuts. Planning for fish on Friday throughout the year ensures you don’t have to make last minute adjustments during lent for example, to accommodate a religious preference of families in your program. Both poultry and pork are naturally low in fat and can be less expensive than beef, depending on the time of year and choice of cut. Keep in mind that cured meats and processed lunchmeat are higher in sodium than other protein foods, so limiting these is a healthy choice.

By starting with a meal plan that includes several protein foods each week, you can be flexible and aware of store fliers to take advantage of seasonal or temporary discount prices. Having extra freezer space is another way to take advantage of sale prices. Stock up when the foods you enjoy are on sale and use them for weeks to come.

Mixed Dish Foods

Some of the best meal options come from mixed dish foods that include several food groups together. Mixed dishes can credit for up to three food groups as long as they include the minimum serving size required in each portion. These may include Tacos, Casseroles, Soup or Stews, Lasagna or other pasta, Burgers with veggies on top, Sandwiches, and more.



Grain/Bread Items

When it comes to planning your bread and other grain-based foods, the possibilities are endless. The new meal pattern for CACFP (Child and Adult Care Food Program) requires at least one bread/grain item served each day be whole grain rich. Some thoughts that come to mind are wild or brown rice, whole grain pasta, bread or buns, oatmeal or other whole grain cereal. To avoid possible deduction on your monthly claim, you may want to set your goal higher than just 1 whole grain per day. That way you are covered by serving more whole grains in the event of a schedule change; schedules have a sneaky way of changing due to bad weather, or other unplanned events.

If you are planning menus for a gluten-free diet, you may choose to start with the grain portion of the menu and build around that. For example, using oatmeal as a regular breakfast food can include many add-ins to incorporate fruit, nuts, or other flavors. In the past it was difficult to find gluten-free options for pasta, bread, or buns, but that is no longer the case. Most grocery stores now carry product lines that cater to those customers with food allergies and sensitivity. Reading food labels will help you find safe products for those clients with food allergies.

Note: A Special Diet Statement/Medical Statement may be required for clients on gluten-free diets.

For breakfast, grain items often include cold cereal (remember to choose whole grain cereals with low-sugar content to meet the new meal patterns). Other common options are toast, pancakes, waffles, English muffins, bagels, muffins or biscuits, and don't forget about hot cereals like oatmeal, cream of wheat, or grits.

The bread/grain component at breakfast can be replaced by a meat/meat alternate up to three days per week to add flexibility and protein to your menus.



Powerful Produce

Now that fruits and vegetables are separate food groups in the CACFP, you can double up on these vitamin-packed, delicious foods. It is a good idea to provide a variety of colors and textures in the fruits and vegetables you serve.

Breakfast meal patterns in the CACFP may include either a fruit or a vegetable or a mix of both to equal the minimum serving. At



lunch or supper, you can choose to serve one fruit and one vegetable or two vegetables. Best of all, you can always serve additional foods from the fruit or vegetable categories.

Focus on Fruits

Depending on the season, you may find fresh, canned, frozen or dried fruits that fit your needs. Each style meets the nutritional need for vitamins and minerals, but it is the texture and flavor that are different. Canned fruit are often soft in texture and make a great option for babies and younger children as they transition to table food. Soft foods can be easily eaten without having strong teeth and well-established facial muscles, and children typically enjoy the sweet flavor of fruits.

When shopping, look for canned fruit packed in water or light syrup instead of those packed in sugar or heavy syrup to reduce empty calories that can lead to overweight and obesity. Although fruit juice is popular among parents, even 100% juice does not contain the same nutrients as fresh, frozen, or canned

fruits. CACFP meal patterns allow pasteurized, full-strength juice to be used to meet the vegetable or fruit requirement at only one meal or snack per day. Fresh and dried fruit products, which may be more expensive than canned, provide the highest level of fiber and nutrients. The fiber provided by fresh and dried fruits plays a big role in healthy digestion and nutrient intake. Frozen fruits are a great way to include color and flavor even during the winter months when fresh fruits are limited or may cost more.

When planning your menu, try to include fruits of various colors and textures, similar to the protein foods we covered earlier, to meet the nutrient need of growing bodies and brains. Think about red fruits one day, blue or purple fruits another day, and orange or green fruits on the third day. As cooks, we get in a rut and offer the same few fruits each week that are lacking in bright color and nutrient content, like bananas and applesauce. Not that bananas and applesauce are bad foods, but humans need a variety of colors to satisfy our nutritional needs, so more colors are even better.

Vary Your Veggies

Research shows that vegetables are the least preferred and the least eaten foods for children. This leads to missed opportunities for vitamins and minerals for children. You can make a difference by offering a wide range of vegetables to your crew. Try incorporating fresh, steamed, roasted, cooked and raw veggies to find what each child likes best. As with any food, some people prefer spicy flavorings, sauces, or dips while others like their food plain, just the way nature created it. Giving children the option to choose a dip or seasoning for their veggies encourages their independence and supports their individual taste preferences.

It is a good idea to include veggies from the various color groups throughout the week. White or tan veggies have the least nutrients, while those with vibrant colors are more nutrient dense. The different colors of vegetables provide different nutrients. Vegetables come from five subgroups based on their nutrient content. Those subgroups are: Dark Green, Starchy, Beans and Peas, Red and Oranges, and Other veggies that don't fit into the main categories.

Like fruits, veggies come in a variety of styles, with fresh, canned, frozen, and dried readily available at most grocery stores. By using each type, you can take advantage of fresh foods and even serve vegetables that are out of season, yet affordable, because they were frozen for later use. We've included a long list of vegetable options as a resource to use in your own program.

Snacks vs. Treats

When you plan your menus don't get confused about the difference between snacks and treats. Snacks include at least two food groups and they are nutritious foods that provide fuel until the next meal time. Treats, on the other hand, do not provide adequate nutrients and often contain added sugar, fat, and sodium. These empty calories cause blood sugar to rise. The resulting behavior can be tough for even the most experienced providers to manage. In today's environment, children receive treats more often than in previous generations. This may be a contributing factor to the increasing levels of childhood overweight and obesity. A good rule of thumb is to include a fruit or vegetable with each snack whenever possible to ensure children get their daily recommended servings of each. The second food group can be from any of the other options: grain, milk, or meat/meat alternate.



Menu Planning Summary

Having a great menu to follow makes meal time easier and provides a list for your next grocery trip. Based on the season, you can include more warm comfort food in the winter months or more sandwiched and picnic fare in the summer. The best part is that you get to choose the foods that fit your style and your budget. If you have questions as you plan your menus, your Wildwood field representative or office staff are just a phone call or email away.

Included for your convenience are a blank menu template and a food list to get your thoughts flowing. These are intentionally printed back to back so that you can make copies and use these tools as you plan your menus.

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