

Parent's Guide to Special Diet Requests for School Meals

Requirements: Schools must make reasonable changes to meals and/or snacks for students who are considered to have a disability or medical need that restricts their diet. This is done on a case-by-case basis.

Your student has a right to equal access to School Meals.

What Defines a Disability?

The term disability includes any person with a physical or mental impairment that greatly limits one or more major life activities, including major bodily functions.

Food substitutions must be made for students who are considered to have a disability that affects their diet.

- **Major life activities** include, but are not limited to caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, seeing, hearing, eating, sleeping, walking, bending, speaking, breathing, learning, reading, and concentrating.
- **Major bodily functions** include but are not limited to functions of the immune system, digestive, bowel, bladder, neurological, brain, respiratory, circulatory, endocrine, and reproductive functions.
- **Examples** include diabetes, Crohn's disease, Celiac disease, autism, lactose intolerance, and food allergies.

What Defines a Dietary Preference?

Dietary preferences **are not** considered medical conditions or disabilities and are not required to be honored.

These could include:

- Personal lifestyle choices (such as vegan, vegetarian, or organic)
- Religious choices (such as eliminating pork, beef, or eggs)
- General health concerns (such as a preference that a child eat a gluten-free diet because a parent believes it is better for the child)

If the school chooses to follow a request due to a dietary preference, then they must make sure all meal pattern requirements are met for the meal to get reimbursed.

Making Plans to Keep Students Safe

What does a reasonable menu change mean?

The menu change provided does not have to be the exact change requested.

- Schools are not required to provide specific brand names requested.
- Meal changes do not need to mirror the item being replaced.

Example: If lasagna is on the menu, a gluten free lasagna option for a participant with Celiac disease is not required; they could provide beans and rice instead.

- Schools are required to provide the student a meal that is safe for them to eat, allowing them equal opportunity to eat school meals, but it does not need to be a different meal each day. It is best to provide variety, but some diets are too restrictive, and it may not be possible.
- To the amount possible, the meal or snack provided should follow the School Lunch and Breakfast meal patterns.
- The student must be offered food from each of the five parts of the meal pattern (fruit, vegetable, grain, meat/protein and milk).
Example: A student with a dairy allergy needs to be offered a milk substitute each day.

Making Everyone Welcome at Meals

Schools must serve students with special diet requests due to medical need in the most inclusive way possible.

Example: a student cannot be required to sit in another room during meal services.

However, balancing safety with feeling left out is important when a student has a severe anaphylactic food allergy. A separate table may be necessary to control exposure to the allergen. An allergen free table is one way many schools handle it.

Steps to Get Started:

- ☐ **Step 1: Inform the school of your student's special dietary need(s) or dietary preference in writing.**
- ☐ **Step 2: Complete the required paperwork (see next page for this information).**
- ☐ **Step 3: Meet with school staff to create a safe food plan for your student.**
- ☐ **Step 4: Keep communication open with the school and work together to create a safe place.**

What Paperwork is Required?

A **Special Diet Statement** is required if the special diet request results in a meal or snack that **does not fully meet meal pattern requirements**.

A special diet statement **must have** the following information to be considered complete:

- ✓ Food or allergen to be avoided
- ✓ Explanation of how exposure to the food or allergen would affect the student
- ✓ Food(s) to be replaced
- ✓ Completed and signed by a state licensed Physician (MD or DO), Physician Assistant (PA), an Advanced Practice Care Nurse (such as a Nurse Practitioner NP) or Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RD or RDN)

A Special Diet Statement template is available on the Michigan Department of Education website. Other documentation, such as a doctor's note, may be accepted if it contains all the required information noted above.

Registered Dietitians signing a special diet statement should be part of the participant's healthcare team.

What if a student has an Individualized Education Program (IEP)?

If the student's IEP or 504 Plan includes the same information that is required in a Special Diet Statement, it is not necessary for the school to get a separate Special Diet Statement.

Any nutrition-related services included in a student's IEP or 504 Plan deemed necessary for the student to receive a free appropriate public education must be provided by the school.

What if the Special Diet Statement is not clear?

If the Special Diet Statement is not clear or does not fully explain the change needed, the school must get clarification from you or the medical personnel to provide a safe meal.

Before you can contact the medical personnel directly, the school must have you sign the Voluntary Authorization Section on the Special Diet Statement.

For More Information on Food Allergies:

- [Food and Drug Administration's "Food Allergies: What you need to know"](#)
- [Institute for Child Nutrition's Food Allergy Fact Sheets](#)
- Food Allergy Research & Education: www.foodallergy.org
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [Food Allergies in Schools](#)

Drink Options in School Meals

What drink must schools serve?

Schools are required to serve 1 cup of fluid cow's milk with breakfast and lunch. For Kindergarten through 12th grade students, it can be flavored or unflavored milk. It can only be 1% or fat free milk. Preschool students and younger cannot have flavored milk.

What happens if my student is not able to drink cow's milk?

A complete Special Diet Statement, signed by a Physician (MD or DO), Physician Assistant (PA), an Advanced Practice Care Nurse (such as a Nurse Practitioner NP) or Registered Dietitian (RD or RDN) needs to be given to the school, then a substitute will be provided.

What are other drink options?

Lactose free and lactose-reduced milk can be offered instead because they are cow's milk. An email or written note from the parent or guardian is all that is needed.

Non-dairy beverages may be allowed:

- If the beverage **has** the same nutrition as cow's milk, it is allowed in school meals. Usually, soy milk meets this standard. A written request from a parent or medical professional is needed.
- If the beverage **does not** have the same nutrition as cow's milk, it cannot be served at parent request. A complete Special Diet Statement is required to serve it. Examples of these beverages are almond and rice milks.

Water and juice are not allowed as substitutes for cow's milk without a complete special diet statement.

Adapted from the Minnesota Department of Education

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