

Catering Menu Standards

These catering standards are designed to help early years providers offer nutritious food and drink to children aged 1 to 5 years in their care. In line with EYFS Nutrition Guidance (2025), and Eat Better, Start Better (2017), the guidance supports providers in meeting the EYFS requirement that states: *'Where children are provided with meals, snacks and drinks, these must be healthy, balanced and nutritious'*. Following these standards is important to ensure children receive the right amount of nutrients and develop healthy eating habits.

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Growing Healthy Families Catering Menu Standards			
Meal	Essential criteria	Achieved (yes/no)	Comments/suggestions
Breakfast	Each day, are the following offered at breakfast:		
	A portion of starchy carbohydrates (cereal/porridge/bread/toast/English muffin/crumpet)		
	A serving of plain milk <u>or</u> other dairy food (yoghurt/cheese)		
	A portion of fruit <u>or</u> vegetables		
	Water		
	Over the week, are the following offered at breakfast:		
	Only cereals fortified with vitamins and minerals, labelled low (green) sugar on packaging		
	No high (red) sugar cereals (chocolate flavoured/honey coated/frosted)		
	Offer a variety of wholegrain and white starchy foods each week		
	At least three different starchy/carbohydrate foods (refer to table 1 for examples)		
Meal	Essential criteria	Achieved (yes/no)	Comments/suggestions
Lunch	Each day, are the following offered at lunch:		
	A portion of meat, poultry, fish, meat alternative, eggs or pulses		
	For vegetarian children, a suitable meat alternative similar in texture and appearance to meat-based dish		
	A portion of starchy carbohydrates (refer to table 1 for examples)		
	Two different vegetables (refer to table 1 for examples)		
	Water		
	Include a main course and a milk or fruit-based dessert		

Lunch	Over the week, are the following offered at lunch:		
	Red and white meat at least once <i>(refer to table 1 for examples)</i>		
	Fish at least once <i>(refer to table 1 for examples)</i>		
	A variety of wholegrain and white starchy carbohydrates each week <i>(refer to table 1 for examples)</i>		
	Meat alternative or pulses for all children at least once <i>(refer to table 1 for examples)</i>		
	At least four different vegetarian options such as meat alternatives, eggs and pulses		
	Processed meats no more than once <i>(sausages/burgers/nuggets/sausage rolls/individual pies/canned meat)</i>		
	Processed fish no more than once <i>(fish fingers/coated fish product)</i>		
	Processed meat alternative no more than once <i>(vegetarian sausages/burgers/nuggets/pies)</i>		
	At least three different starchy carbohydrates <i>(refer to table 1 for examples)</i>		
	Processed or fried potato products no more than once <i>(chips and roast potatoes)</i>		
	Tinned pasta products no more than once and choose no added sugar option <i>(spaghetti hoops)</i>		
	No flavoured dried rice, pasta and noodle products <i>(packets and pots of instant flavoured noodles/pasta/rice)</i>		
	At least three different vegetables <i>(refer to table 1 for examples)</i>		
	Low sugar and salt baked beans as a vegetable no more than once		
	A fruit-based dessert at least twice		

	A milk-based dessert at least three times		
Meal	Essential criteria	Achieved (yes/no)	Comments/suggestions
Tea/Light Meal	Each day, are the following offered at tea:		
	A portion of meat, poultry, fish, meat alternative, eggs or pulses		
	For vegetarian children, a suitable meat alternative similar in texture and appearance to meat-based dish		
	A portion of starchy carbohydrates (refer to table 1 for examples)		
	A portion of vegetables or fruit (refer to table 1 for examples)		
	Water		
	Include a main course and a milk or fruit-based dessert		
	Over the week, are the following offered at tea:		
	Red and white meat at least once (refer to table 1 for examples)		
	Fish at least once (refer to table 1 for examples)		
	A variety of wholegrain and white starchy carbohydrates each week (refer to table 1 for examples)		
	Meat alternative or pulses for all children at least once (refer to table 1 for examples)		
	At least three different vegetarian options such as meat alternatives, eggs and pulses		
	Processed meats no more than once (sausages/burgers/nuggets/sausage rolls/individual pies/canned meat)		
	Processed fish no more than once (fish fingers/coated fish product)		
	Processed meat alternative no more than once (vegetarian sausages/burgers/nuggets/pies)		
	At least three different starchy carbohydrates		

	(refer to table 1 for examples)		
	Processed or fried potato products no more than once (chips and roast potatoes)		
	Tinned pasta products no more than once (spaghetti hoops)		
	No flavoured dried rice, pasta and noodle products (packets and pots of instant flavoured noodles/pasta/rice)		
	At least three different vegetables (refer to table 1 for examples)		
	Low sugar and salt baked beans as a vegetable no more than once		
	A fruit-based or milk-based dessert at least three times		
Meal	Essential criteria	Achieved (yes/no)	Comments/suggestions
Morning and Afternoon Snacks	Each day, are the following offered at snacks:		
	A choice of at least two different snack each snack time		
	At least one portion of fruit, and/or vegetable offered every day (refer to table 1 for examples, no dried fruit)		
	Starchy carbohydrate foods offered as part of at least one snack each day (refer to table 1 for examples)		
	Snack foods are sugar-free or savoury		
	Plain milk and/or water		
	Over the week, are the following offered at snack time:		
	Meat, fish, eggs, and meat alternatives offered no more than once or twice a week		
	Cheese or plain yoghurt no more than twice per week		
	No Flavoured dried rice, pasta, and noodle products		
	No salty snacks such as crisps		
Meal	Essential criteria	Achieved (yes/no)	Comments/suggestions

Entire Menu	Provide at least three different varieties of starchy carbohydrates each day, and across each meal and snack every week. These should be a variety of wholegrain and white starchy carbohydrates.		
	Access to drinking water throughout day and children encouraged to help themselves		
	Oily fish is provided (such as salmon, sardines, pilchards or mackerel) at least once every three weeks as part of lunch or tea, but not more than twice each week, as it can contain low levels of pollutants. When oily fish is not provided in a main meal, you could try to provide as a snack.		
	Whole (full fat) milk given to children aged from one to two years as their main drink.		
	Children over the age of two can have semi-skimmed milk if they are growing well and eating a healthy, balanced diet. Avoid skimmed milk as this is low in fat and does not provide enough energy for children under five.		
	Choose bread and bread products with lower salt content, those labelled as low (green) or medium (amber).		
	Fat spreads made from vegetable oils, which are high in unsaturated fats such as olive oil used.		
	Use as little oil in cooking as possible, and choose a cooking oil high in unsaturated fats, such as vegetable, rapeseed, sunflower or olive oil.		
	Grill or bake food instead of frying.		
	Limit use of ready-made sauces, condiments, soups, stocks and gravy granules.		
	Use of pastry limited to once a week		
	Avoid foods high in saturated fat, salt and/or sugars (HFSS) such as cakes, biscuits, crisps, chocolate and other confectionary.		
	Limit dairy ice cream and cream to once a week at mealtimes with fruit-based desserts.		

	Avoid foods and drinks containing artificial sweeteners. They may encourage children to prefer overly sweet foods		
	Do not add salt in cooking		
	Provide a variety of fruit and vegetables		
	No processed desserts more than once e.g. angel delight, jelly cubes, pre-made cheesecake		
	Do not use tinned fruit, vegetables or pulses with added sugar, syrup or salt.		
	No additives or trans-fats used		

Table 1. Examples of common foods in each food group

Starchy carbohydrates	Vegetables fresh/frozen/canned	Fruits fresh/frozen/canned	Meat/meat alternatives	Dairy and alternatives	High Fat, Salt, Sugar (HFSS) food and drinks
Potato	Carrots	Bananas	Beef	Milk	Butter/margarine/oil
Pasta	Green beans	Pears	Lamb	Cheese (Full fat up to 2yrs at least)	Cream/sour cream
White whole grain brown rice	Broccoli	Grapes	Pork	Processed cheese (sticks/triangles/slices)	Crème fraiche
Noodles	Cauliflower	Kiwi fruit	Chicken	Cream cheese (Full fat up to 2yrs at least)	Mascarpone
Couscous	Cabbage	Oranges	White fish	Yoghurt No added sugar (Full fat up to 2yrs at least)	Sugar
Bread/Rolls/English muffins (white/brown/grain)	Courgettes	Plums	Tuna	Fromage frais No added sugar (Full fat up to 2yrs at least)	Honey/syrup/treacle
Tortilla	Peppers	Berries	Cod	Custard	Muffins (cake style)
Pita	Leeks	Melon	Haddock	For children over one year with a milk allergy or with vegan dietary preference, unsweetened calcium fortified soya drink can be used as a non-dairy alternative.	Biscuits
Chapati/naan/paratha/roti	Onions	Apple	Pollock		Cakes
Crackers/crispbread/oatcake	Okra	Pineapple	Oily fish		Doughnuts
Crumpet/pancake/scone	Swede	Mandarin	Mackerel		Pastries/Pies
Breakfast cereal	Pak choi	Prunes	Sardines		Ice-cream

Porridge/oats	Peas	Figs	Herrings		Jelly
Semolina	Sweetcorn	Mango	Pilchards		Mousse (e.g. chocolate)
Tapioca	Celery	Dried fruit used in desserts	Salmon		Ice lollies
Polenta	Cucumber		Eggs		Sweets
	Tomato		Cheese		Chocolate
	Radish		Pulses/Legumes/Lentils		Fizzy drinks
	Beetroot		Quorn/Soya		Squash
	Pulses/lentils served as a vegetable alongside meat, fish or meat alternative.		Choose lean cuts of meat and remove visible fat and skin from meat and poultry.		Some canned fruit and vegetables contain added sugar, syrup or salt.

Table 2. Examples of common foods in sub-groups (for menu audit)				
Processed potato products	Processed meats/ meat alternatives	Milk based desserts	Fruit based desserts*	Unsaturated margarine/ cooking oils
Chips	Corned beef	Rice/Semolina/Tapioca pudding	Fruit/fruit salad (fresh/ tinned)	Vegetable
Potato waffles	Pressed meats (Luncheon/Salami/Chicken roll)	Milk jelly	Fruit fool	Soya
Alphabites™	Sausage (meat/Quorn)	Angel delight	Fruit compote	Rapeseed
Smiles™	Pastry (sausage roll/pasty/meat pie)	Yoghurt	Fruit crumble/pie	Olive
Potato scone	Crumbed/battered (schnitzel/nuggets/fish fingers/Quorn nuggets/fillets/scotch eggs)	Custard	Eve's pudding	Groundnut/Peanut
Potato hash		Fromage frais	Fruit cake/muffin (sweetened with fresh or dried fruit)	Sunflower
Crisps		Cheesecake	Fruit jelly	
			Steamed fruit pudding	

			Baked apple/pear/peach	
			Stewed fruit	
			*fruit based desserts should aim to include 40g fresh fruit or 20g dried fruit per portion	

Table 3. Drinks			
Suitable			
Water			
Milk	0-1 years	1-2 years	2+ years
	Breastmilk	Whole (full fat) or semi-skimmed milk for children growing and eating well	Semi-skimmed milk for children growing and eating well
		WHO recommends breastmilk up to 2 years and beyond	
Not suitable			
Skimmed milk or skimmed milk products, these are low in fat and do not provide enough energy for children under 5.			
Fruit juice (even diluted) as these contain large amounts of fruit sugar (fructose) and is acidic, fruit sugar and acid can cause tooth decay in children.			
Fruit juice drinks such as fruit shoots often contain added sugar or sweeteners, and provide little nutritional value.			
Fruit squash, even those labelled 'sugar free' or 'reduced sugar' can contribute to tooth decay and provide little nutritional value.			
Fizzy drinks, even those labelled 'sugar free' or 'reduced sugar' can contribute to tooth decay and provide little nutritional value.			
Flavoured water, even those labelled 'sugar free' or 'reduced sugar' can contribute to tooth decay and provide little nutritional value.			

References

Action for Children, 2017. Eat Better, Start Better. Voluntary Food and Drink Guidelines for Early Years Settings in England – A Practical Guide. Available at: [Eat Better, Start Better – Foundation Years](#)

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