
SUMMARY

CMS menus succeed in offering fresh fruit, legumes, meatless meals, and plant-based options daily, and all classes of vegetables are offered regularly each week. However, the menus fail to offer warm meatless meals centered around plant-based proteins each day, emphasize 100% whole grains, or advertise nondairy milk alternates. In addition, processed meats should be removed as soon as possible while cholesterol-rich foods like red meat and eggs should be restricted. While the lunch menus in particular had many positive attributes, the menus overall at CMS earn a "D" score on average.



STRENGTHS



Red-orange, dark green, and starchy vegetables offered regularly



Fresh fruit offered daily



Legumes offered in some form daily



Meatless and plant-based meals offered daily

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT



Immediately remove processed meat (chicken nuggets, hot dogs, bacon, pepperoni, lunch meat)



Restrict high-cholesterol foods like red meat and eggs



Emphasize 100% whole grains and restrict ultra-processed products heavy in refined grains and sugars



Serve water or plant-based milk options and restrict sugar-added varieties of all milk



Provide warm, meatless entrees centered around plant proteins daily



Improve menu transparency by adding portion sizes of all meats

BALANCING MENUS

Given that a significant and increasing proportion of children today show signs of metabolic syndrome, including high blood cholesterol, and diabetes or pre-diabetes, focusing menu reforms on three dietary components—saturated fat, cholesterol, and fiber—is a particularly high-impact way to improve food environments so that they will promote children's long-term health.

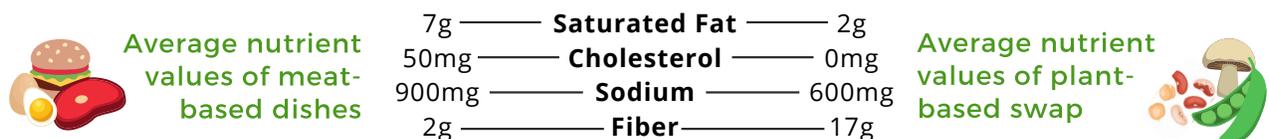
There is a robust causal link between saturated fat intake and elevated LDL cholesterol levels, a well-established marker for risk of heart disease and cardiovascular events. In addition to increasing risk for cardiovascular diseases, higher saturated fat intake is a significant risk factor for systemic inflammation, insulin resistance, and obesity.

Furthermore, the oxidation of dietary cholesterol, found only in animal products, poses significant potential health risks. Cholesterol oxidation products (COPs) are likely involved in both initiation and progression of chronic diseases, including atherosclerosis, neurodegenerative disease, kidney failure, and diabetes.

Regrettably, less than 3% of American children meet or exceed the minimum adequate intake of fiber per day, which may constitute the most widespread nutrient deficiency in the United States. This profound lack of dietary fiber—found in phytonutrient-rich, whole plant foods but not highly refined foods or animal products—combined with general overconsumption of saturated fats and cholesterol is a clear indicator of the imbalance of our food environments and the need for change.

ENHANCING HEALTHFULNESS

School districts like CMS have improved the healthfulness of their menus by balancing their menus to feature more fresh, whole-food plant products and fewer meat and ultra-processed food products. An example of one simple change that accomplishes both is below. The following information assumes the serving size for each entree is 3 ounces. For a custom assessment, please contact us at menus@balanced.org.



Replacing one meat-based entree per week with a plant-based entree would:



Replacing one chocolate chip cookie dessert with 1/2 cup of strawberries would **eliminate**:

