

Why a Lunch Box Guide?

Educators and caregivers asked our team how to address, teach, and use *Canada's Food Guide*. So we got to work. We collaborated with educators, caregivers, health professionals, and academics to translate *Canada's Food Guide* into a single meal exploration and nutrition education tool – the Lunch Box Guide!

- How to use the Lunch Box Guide?
- How does the Lunch Box Guide support children's nutrient needs?
- How was the Lunch Box Guide developed?
- Keep learning going
- References
- Acknowledgements

How to use the Lunch Box Guide

Offer students voice and choice

The Lunch Box Guide offers young learners a framework for creating simple and nourishing lunches. Our hope is that this resource will act as a starting point for children and caregivers to personalize meals based on foods they have available and like to eat.

We use “try for” rather than “have” as this guide is intended to support nutrient needs, not be a set of rules. Remind children that it is okay to have more variety than what is described. For example, while this resource says, “try for two types of vegetables or fruit,” a child can enjoy three or more types of vegetables in a soup or with dip. Similarly, there may be times when less variety is available to children. Overall, the hope is that students are guided to select a variety of foods from Canada's Food Guide throughout the day.

Putting it together

Try for...

<p>TWO TYPES OF VEGETABLES OR FRUITS</p> <table border="0"> <tr><td>Beets</td><td>Kale</td><td>Apples</td></tr> <tr><td>Bell peppers</td><td>Lettuce</td><td>Apple sauce</td></tr> <tr><td>Broccoli</td><td>Mushrooms</td><td>Bananas</td></tr> <tr><td>Cabbage</td><td>Peas</td><td>Berries</td></tr> <tr><td>Carrots</td><td>Potatoes</td><td>Grapes</td></tr> <tr><td>Cauliflower</td><td>Spinach</td><td>Mango</td></tr> <tr><td>Celery</td><td>Squash</td><td>Melon</td></tr> <tr><td>Corn</td><td>Sweet potato</td><td>Oranges</td></tr> <tr><td>Cucumber</td><td>Tomatoes</td><td>Peaches</td></tr> <tr><td>Green beans</td><td></td><td>Pears</td></tr> </table>	Beets	Kale	Apples	Bell peppers	Lettuce	Apple sauce	Broccoli	Mushrooms	Bananas	Cabbage	Peas	Berries	Carrots	Potatoes	Grapes	Cauliflower	Spinach	Mango	Celery	Squash	Melon	Corn	Sweet potato	Oranges	Cucumber	Tomatoes	Peaches	Green beans		Pears	<p>ONE TYPE OF WHOLE GRAIN FOOD</p> <table border="0"> <tr><td>Bagels</td><td>Naan</td></tr> <tr><td>Bread</td><td>Noodles</td></tr> <tr><td>Bun</td><td>Pancakes</td></tr> <tr><td>Cereal</td><td>Pita</td></tr> <tr><td>Couscous</td><td>Rice</td></tr> <tr><td>Crackers</td><td>Tortillas</td></tr> <tr><td>Muffins</td><td></td></tr> </table>	Bagels	Naan	Bread	Noodles	Bun	Pancakes	Cereal	Pita	Couscous	Rice	Crackers	Tortillas	Muffins		<p>TWO TYPES OF PROTEIN FOODS</p> <table border="0"> <tr><td>Cheese</td><td>Beans</td></tr> <tr><td>Kefir</td><td>Hummus</td></tr> <tr><td>Milk</td><td>Lentils</td></tr> <tr><td>Yogurt</td><td>Nuts</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>Seeds</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>Seed, pea or nut butter</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>Tofu</td></tr> <tr><td>Beef</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Chicken</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Egg</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Fish</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Lamb</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Pork</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Wild game</td><td></td></tr> </table>	Cheese	Beans	Kefir	Hummus	Milk	Lentils	Yogurt	Nuts		Seeds		Seed, pea or nut butter		Tofu	Beef		Chicken		Egg		Fish		Lamb		Pork		Wild game		
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Choose sauces and sides to complement:

Examples include condiments such as dips, salad dressing, cream cheese, mayonnaise, mustard, ketchup, salsa, barbecue sauce, soy sauce, and butter, as well as foods such as pickles, granola bars, cookies, and pretzels.

How does the Lunch Box Guide support children's nutrient needs?

This resource aims to translate *Canada's Food Guide* into a useful tool for young learners. It includes information from both *Food Guide Snapshot*¹ and Canada's Dietary Guidelines² which refer to the types and proportions of foods to eat. Special attention was placed on how foods can be selected in a way that supports children's unique nutrient needs.³

The benefit of variety

No one food or type of food can provide us with everything we need. When children eat a variety of foods, they are more likely to get the nutrition their growing bodies and minds need. That is why choosing different foods between and within each food category is important.

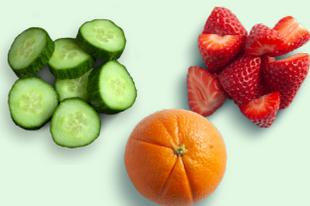
Guiding concepts

Foods from each category work together, like pieces of a puzzle, to provide important nutrients. The table below provides more detail on the nutrition concepts included in this resource.

Canada's Food Guide Categories

Nutrition Concepts^{2,4}

Vegetables and Fruits



Try for two types of vegetables or fruits at lunch.

Different types of vegetables and fruits provide unique nutrients. They come in many forms, including canned, fresh, and frozen. Students are more likely to get the nutrients they need when they include different types of vegetables and fruits at meals.

Whole Grain Foods



Try for one type of whole grain food at lunch.

Whole grain and whole wheat foods include all parts of the grain, which provides unique nutrients. They come in many varieties, including breads, cereals, noodles, and rice. Students are more likely to get the nutrients they need when they include different types of whole grain and whole wheat foods at meals.

Protein Foods



Try for two types of protein foods at lunch.

Different types of protein foods, such as plant- and animal-based proteins, provide unique nutrients. They come in many varieties, including beans, peas, lentils, seeds, meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and milk products. Students are more likely to get the nutrients they need when they include different types of protein foods at meals.

How was the Lunch Box Guide Developed?



A student-centered approach to teaching *Canada's Food Guide*

Nutrition education does not have to be complex to be impactful. Teachers understand the importance of using developmentally appropriate messaging for students. Our team worked with educators, caregivers, health professionals, and academics to translate complex nutrition concepts and research into a clear and actionable tool.

The Lunch Box Guide is meant to support students in making food decisions that respect the reality of their needs and resources. Food choices can be based on taste, hunger, food traditions, and health. The ability of students and their caregivers to meet these needs is tied to access and resources such as money, time, space, skills, equipment, and support. Our hope is that this resource will be personalized and used in ways that empower young learners and their families.

What about serving sizes?

Canada's Food Guide no longer focuses on amounts of food or serving sizes². Instead, it promotes the benefits of a good relationship with food and enjoyable eating experiences¹. The Lunch Box Guide encourages children to include foods they like to eat from each category in the *Food Guide*. This framework supports children and their caregivers to make decisions about the amount of food needed to satisfy growth and appetite. The lunch examples you see in this resource have been modelled to align with the School Healthy Eating Index (School-HEI).⁵

We use the expression “try for” rather than “have” as this guide is intended to support nutrient needs, not be a set of rules. We recognize that there are barriers to following the advice in *Canada's Food Guide*, such as access, income, and family stressors, thus this resource is meant to support progress, not perfection.

How were foods selected?

Foods from *Canada's Food Guide*

Canada's Food Guide identifies three categories – vegetables and fruits, whole grain foods, and protein foods – as foundational to eating well. Within this context, the National Nutritious Food Basket⁶ (NNFB) informed the foods that were selected. The NNFB names affordable, nutritious foods commonly eaten in Canada and is meant to support *Canada's Food Guide*. Nutritious foods that are more costly or more challenging to find were not included.



Sauces and sides

Educators and parents asked our team how to address foods beyond *Canada's Food Guide Plate*. The section “sauces and sides” was created to highlight these supporting foods.

Often foods that do not fit neatly into the categories in *Canada's Food Guide* are considered unessential or “junk” foods. For example, what would curry be without turmeric or chilies? Salad without salad dressing? A chewy cookie can add flavour and texture to a meal. None of these ingredients or foods belong to a category, yet they all have value.

Health Canada does not support labelling foods “healthy” or “unhealthy.”⁷ Calling foods “unhealthy” or “junk” can be harmful to a child’s relationship with food and their relationships with caregivers who provide food.

Making space for a variety of foods contributes to a positive relationship with food and recognizes that factors such as taste, culture, and food traditions play a role in students’ food choices. The aim with sauces and sides is to pair them in a way that supports the enjoyment of the meal. The sauces and sides included in this resource are based on teacher, parent, and health professional feedback on acceptability and family practices.

How were meals selected?

Meals were selected for this guide based on ingredient access (NNFB⁶) and ease of preparation, and considering common allergy guidelines. Parents noted that they wanted meals that would not require reheating and that offered a balance of plant- and animal-based proteins. Each meal idea has been pilot tested for acceptability.

The meals pictured were assessed using the School-HEI as one measure of nutritional adequacy. In Canada, the average School-HEI is 53.4 points out of 100 points⁵. The lunches depicted in this guide scored an average of 82 points, which represents a high-quality diet. Each lunch met these criteria because of the variety of foods they included. Eating a combination of plant, dairy, and animal foods provides nutrients that support child and adolescent growth and reduces the risk of nutrient deficiencies (or excesses).^{4,8-9}

Keep Learning Going

Teaching *Canada's Food Guide* works well when students are given lots of time and opportunity to explore and practice. Start with hands-on food activities, then add gentle, well-timed reinforcement of nutrition concepts such as those included in the Lunch Box Guide.

Looking for more free nutrition resources developed with teachers? Explore [TeachNutrition.ca](https://teachnutrition.ca).



References

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Acknowledgements

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