

FAQ: Top Questions about Canada's Food Guide in the School Setting

As child and youth public health dietitians, we have frequent discussions about how to apply Canada's new food guide in the school setting. Below are eight top questions about the guide with responses designed to promote healthy eating with children and youth that support both physical and mental well-being.



1. [Is our new food guide just a plate?](#)
2. [Do I tell my students they should eat ½ a plate of vegetables and fruit at each meal?](#)
3. [Is dairy gone from the food guide?](#)
4. [How can I get my students to stop eating “unhealthy food”?](#)
5. [What about cultural and traditional foods?](#)
6. [How do we promote ‘plant-based choices’ with the new food guide?](#)
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1. Is our new food guide just a plate?

The colourful plate is half of the food guide snapshot and a visual reminder of some key health-promoting messages. It is a small portion of the food guide and not a stand-alone tool.

The new food guide is now an interactive website, including actionable advice, recipes, and videos designed to support people to make diverse food choices to meet their nutrient needs. For example, the [healthy eating at school page](#) includes a video, recipe, tips, and various links to support families and school staff to encourage healthy eating for school-aged children.

The plate graphic was not designed to be a stand-alone print resource to replace the previous food guide rainbow. It also doesn't represent amounts to be eaten of specific foods (i.e. 2 cubes of tofu or 1 Tbsp of yogurt). The plate has reframed previous communications to improve understanding of some key messages. For example:

- the Meat and Alternatives food group included plant-based foods such as beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, soy
- the Milk and Alternatives food group included fortified soy beverage

The new 'protein' grouping includes foods from both the former Milk and Alternatives and Meat and Alternatives groups and emphasizes that we can obtain important nutrients from more than just meat.

School staff may want to refer to a hard copy of the food guide poster to visually engage students offline but, it is important to recognize the flexibility and diversity of food patterns encouraged within the new online guide. For content to share with students' families, refer to the article [What's New with Canada's Food Guide?](#).

[Subscribe](#) to receive Health Canada's latest healthy eating updates, which include tips to put the food guide content into action.

2. Is dairy gone from the food guide? Should I tell my students not to drink milk?

We can continue to encourage children to consume a variety of foods from the food groupings to obtain the nutrients they need to grow and be active. A key nutrient that was found in the former Milk and Alternatives food group is calcium – a key building block of strong bones. Foods from the former Milk and Alternatives Food Group, which included dairy products and fortified soy beverage, can now be found in the ‘protein foods’ grouping of the food guide. Dairy products, along with other fortified soy products and canned fish (with the bones), are the calcium-rich food sources in the ‘protein foods’ grouping.

More on the topic of dairy and the food guide can be found in the article [Is Dairy in the New Food Guide?](#).

3. Do I tell my students they should eat ½ a plate of vegetables and fruit at each meal?

The food guide no longer includes reference amounts for foods. The intent is to focus on including a variety of foods from the food groupings. The plate graphic from the food guide snapshot was [not designed to be prescriptive](#). Aim to offer foods from the three food groupings (vegetables and fruit, whole grains, and protein foods) at meals and at least one at snacks. Messages to reinforce when talking about what to eat in general can include those found in the text beside the plate, which are:

“Have plenty of vegetables and fruit”

“Eat protein foods”

“Choose whole grain foods”

“Make water your drink of choice”

The intake of food will vary between individual children and youth from day to day. The expectation is not to use the plate to tell them how much they should eat of any food at any given meal. We suggest encouraging students to explore hunger and fullness cues when [learning to meet their body’s needs](#) from a variety of foods. This helps support building their body’s sense of self-regulation.

Find out more about supporting responsive and intuitive eating at school at:

[Nurturing Healthy Eaters in the Classroom](#)

Find out more about responsive and intuitive eating for children, youth and ourselves from:

[Positive Mealtimes](#)— short booklet with tools to support happy, healthy eating with young children

[Ellyn Satter Institute](#)— internationally recognized eating & feeding specialists for children & adults

- [Feeding with Love and Good Sense: 6 through 13 years](#)— booklet with tools for feeding
- [Feeding with Love and Good Sense: 12 through 18 years](#)— booklet with tools for feeding

[Foundry BC: Healthy Eating](#)— healthy eating tips for youth

By offering children the opportunity to explore a variety of foods at school without pressure on amounts or eating foods in order teaches them long term healthy eating habits. This approach can help reduce the risk of developing disordered eating and/or eating disorders.

If you're involved in planning menus for meals or snacks, you can continue to use the reference amounts and food groupings from 2007, which can be found at [Canada's Food Guide First Nations, Inuit, and Metis guidance](#), as well as including strategies to [create a healthy eating environment at school](#).

4. How can I get my students to stop eating “unhealthy” food?

We encourage nutrition education to be framed with “what can we add?”, rather than focusing on labelling any foods as “junk”, “good or bad”, “healthy” or “unhealthy”. There are so many factors that play a role in students' food choices, including accessibility, affordability, family and cultural background, and mental wellness. By introducing content that allow students to use inquiry in combination with skill building around preparing food, and enjoying food with others, we can support improved mental wellness and academic performance alongside healthy eating.

Promoting healthy eating and a healthy body image includes respecting food choices as well as exploring the various factors that impact the way we eat. To discover resources to encourage a positive relationship to food and body image, check out the [Comprehensive School health Promoting Healthy Body Image](#) resource.

For related content to share with families, refer to the article [Is Sugar Unhealthy for Children?](#)

5. What about cultural and traditional foods?

Culture and tradition have been recognized as valuable contributors to healthy eating in the new food guide and there is more to come on this topic. For example, we are still awaiting updated Indigenous guidance. If you are looking for support around applying the [BC curriculum's First Principles of Learning](#) or the [First Nations Perspective on Health and Wellness](#) in your classroom, we encourage connecting with the school district's [Indigenous Education team](#).

6. How do we promote ‘plant-based choices’ with the new food guide?

The majority of foods promoted in Canada's food guide come from plants, including vegetables, fruit, whole grains, fortified soy products, lentils, beans, nuts, and seeds. When we promote a variety of choices from the food groupings, plant-based foods are innately encouraged. The new guidance includes meat and dairy, and ideas about ways to add more plant-based foods. Ultimately the intention is to inspire change without emphasis on judging individual food choices. In this way, we can provide children with the opportunity to make sustainable change without guilt or shame and regardless of their diverse home environments.

7. How can I use Canada's food guide in the classroom?

The food guide can be used in classroom nutrition education to explore the wide array of foods that can be found in the new food groupings as well as an opportunity to reflect on “how we eat” messages from within the second half of the snapshot. Application of the food guide messages is most effective through hands-on learning activities in the classroom as described below.

For all grades:

We continue to recommend exploring a variety of foods found in the food groupings using content such as the [mystery food activity](#), as well as exploring where foods come from (e.g. apples come from trees, which are

planted in the ground from seeds) and the different ways the students have eaten or seen the food eaten (e.g. sliced apples), along with songs, books, and stories.

Hands-on experiences with food provide a great opportunity to enhance learning outcomes. For example, make a simple recipe together in the classroom using food from the [School fruit and vegetable program](#) or grow food in a [school garden](#) or classroom window. Further enhance the learning and actionable opportunity by sending a simple recipe or communication home to families.

Consider creating a collage or display of photos and pictures of meals and foods eaten by students to demonstrate how we all eat different foods. The end result could also be a colourful classroom display.

For grades 2 to 12:

There is an opportunity to [explore the new food guide recipes](#) with students, many of which include readily accessible and affordable ingredients, and brainstorm about which food groupings the foods in the recipes could be classified into. Lesson plans such as [Meals then and Now](#), [Worldly Restaurant](#) and [mindfulness/mindful eating](#) provide valuable inquiry and skill building surrounding preparing food through:

- reflection on how meals have changed over two or three generations
- the social aspects of food such as eating with others and identifying foods from different cultures
- enjoyment and exploration of the various aspects of eating.

This inquiry-based content supports students to apply the “how we eat” messages in the food guide and can lead to healthier eating behaviours, improved mental wellness, and academic performance.

When clarifying changes with the new guide, we suggest noting that the two former food groups (Meat and alternatives and Milk and alternatives) can now be found in the ‘protein foods’ grouping. Many people think the former groups were ‘meat’ and ‘dairy’ but they have always included fortified soy foods as well as other plant-based foods (beans, lentils, beans etc.), hence the ‘alternatives’.

8. What about students with atypical needs or specific dietary requirements? (eg. autism, allergies, vegetarian/vegan diet, diabetes etc.)

Whether or not a student has specific health requirements, it’s valuable to recognize that everyone is different and honour diversity. Some students and families may benefit from more tailored advice. For specific guidance, we suggest reaching out to the dietitians at HealthLinkBC [via email](#) or phone at 8-1-1.

For more information about:

- supporting a healthy eating environment at school
- building food literacy at schools
- teaching about food and nutrition
- supports for parents and caregivers

Check out [VCH Supporting Healthy Eating at School](#).

