



# Special Dietary Needs Quick Guide

## Guidelines

- The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulations [7 CFR Part 15b](#) require substitutions or modifications in meals through the Child Nutrition Programs for children who are unable to eat the normally provided meal because of a medical need, disability, and/or impairment.
- A modification may include but is not limited to substituting a different food, beverage item, or ingredient; modifying the texture or consistency of a food or beverage item; or serving a specific portion size. The objective of making meal accommodations is for the student to have access to the same benefits as all other students as best as possible.
- Modifications to effectively accommodate children with disabilities must be made on a case-by-case basis and must be related to the disability or limitations caused by the disability.
- It is up to the sponsor to determine if they will offer substitutes for students due to religious or lifestyle choices.
- Once the need is known for the accommodation, whether outside or within the meal pattern, sponsors cannot delay implementation until it receives the proper documentation and must accommodate the student as soon as possible.

## Operations

- Sponsors are encouraged to work as a team with their nurse, 504 coordinator, other relevant personnel, and the student's household to provide the necessary and appropriate accommodations.
- When an accommodation is made, students should not be separated from other students because of their disability. Just as the least restrictive environment applies to classroom instruction, so it applies to meal accommodations as well.
- Sites operating with Offer Versus Serve (OVS) must ensure students with medical disabilities have the same opportunity to select items from the required food components. Sponsors may not eliminate a specific food component for a meal served under OVS as an accommodation for students with disabilities.
  - For example, a sponsor cannot force a child with a lactose intolerance to decline the milk options to meet the accommodation. The sponsor must have an option for the student, even if they do choose to decline it.

## Accommodations

- Accommodations for students are split into two categories – within the meal pattern and outside of the meal pattern.
- When the accommodation **can** be made within the meal pattern (food allergy/intolerance, texture modifications, etc.), sponsors are not required to obtain a medical statement signed by a medical authority.
  - If a sponsor wants a medical statement, they can ask the household to provide this documentation but cannot delay implementation until it is received and must accommodate the student as soon as possible.



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- When the accommodation **cannot** be made within the meal pattern (multiple food allergies, specific food needs, tube feedings, etc.), sponsors need to obtain a medical statement or doctor's note signed by a health care provider with prescriptive authority (i.e. a doctor, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant).
  - A modified meal as specified in the prescribed/signed medical statement is not required to meet the meal pattern but is considered reimbursable when accommodated as written.
    - Sponsors cannot delay implementation until they receive the medical statement and must accommodate the student as soon as possible.
    - If a medical statement is not immediately provided, the sponsor must document the initial interaction with the household and should document all attempts to contact the household regarding obtaining a medical statement.
- When the medical statement is required, it must include:
  - Information about the child's physical or mental impairment that is sufficient to allow the sponsor to understand how it restricts the child's diet;
  - An explanation of what must be done to accommodate the child's disability; and
  - The food or foods to be omitted and recommended alternatives, in the case of a modified meal.
- Unless there is only one product that meets the requirements of the accommodation as prescribed by the medical authority, the sponsor is not required to provide specific brand name products. Sponsors are also not required to provide a product that is a one-for-one match for items being served (such as pizza for pizza).
- Sponsors are not required to accommodate students for religious or lifestyle choices.
  - If a sponsor elects to make substitutions based on a religious or lifestyle choice for one student, the same accommodation should be made for all students with religious or lifestyle requests.
  - If making an accommodation based on religious or lifestyle choices, the accommodation must fit within the meal pattern. No documentation is required, but it is best practice for the sponsor to document the rerequest, communication with the family, and what accommodation was or was not made.
  - If implementing offer versus serve, students can choose to decline certain food components/items due to religious or lifestyle choice.
- For students with medical disabilities who require modifications in food texture (such as chopped, ground, or pureed), instructions on the medical form indicating which food texture is necessary.
  - Sponsors may apply stricter guidelines requiring that a written medical statement for texture modifications be provided.
- For students who need assistance with eating, the determination of who will feed the student is a local decision. While the sponsor is specifically responsible for providing the necessary food for the student, it is not the responsibility of the food service department to physically feed the student.