



Special Dietary Needs

The school foodservice department may be required to accommodate students with special dietary needs. SFE must follow USDA regulations and school district policies related to these accommodations. This guide will explain these regulations, how we accommodate special dietary needs, and the SFE resources available to properly accommodate.

There are three categories of special dietary needs:

- Disabilities
- Non-disability medical or special dietary needs
- Non-medical special dietary needs (i.e. religious, cultural or ethical reason)

Disabilities

It is important that children with disabilities have the same opportunities as other children, including school meals. Under Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a “person with a disability” means any person who has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a record of such an impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment. This includes many diseases and conditions, such as cerebral palsy, epilepsy, cancer, severe food allergy, and diabetes. A few of the major life activities covered by this definition include caring for one’s self, eating, speaking, walking, and the operation of a major bodily function, such as digestion.

Students with a disability will often have an Individualized Education Program (IEP), sometimes referred to as a 504 plan. The IEP is a written statement for a child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). It is the cornerstone of the student’s educational program that contains the special education and related services that schools must provide to a child with a disability covered under IDEA. When nutrition services are required under a child’s IEP, school officials must make sure that school foodservice staff are involved early on in the decisions regarding special meals. Nutrition services included in an IEP must be accommodated by the foodservice department.

Any student with a disability must be provided appropriate accommodations for school meals, at no additional cost. If an IEP is not in place for a student with a disability, a medical statement must be on file in order to receive reimbursement for meal modifications when the modified meal does not meet the Program meal pattern requirements. The statement must identify:

- A description of the child’s physical or mental impairment that is sufficient to allow the SFA to understand how it restricts the child’s diet



- An explanation of what must be done to accommodate the child
- The food or foods to be omitted from the child's diet, and the food or choice of foods that must be substituted

School districts may have their own form for special dietary needs. If not, there is a form on the SFE website that may be used. It is important that the form is filled out completely and accurately and must be kept on file. The medical statement must be signed by a State licensed healthcare professional. This includes MDs, DOs, PAs, and NPs. Statements cannot be signed by RNs, RDs, or other healthcare professionals. Examples of special dietary needs required for disabilities include gluten-free diets for Celiac Disease, food allergies and intolerances that substantially limit a major life activity, and texture-modification for dysphagia.

Non-Disability Medical or Special Dietary Needs

The school foodservice department is encouraged, but not required, to provide food substitutions or modifications for children without disabilities with medically certified special dietary needs who are unable to eat regular meals as prepared. These include food allergies or food intolerances that do not affect a major life activity. Documentation with accompanying information must be provided by a recognized medical authority, and must include:

- An identification of the medical or other special dietary condition which restricts the child's diet
- The food or foods to be omitted from the child's diet
- The food or choice of foods to be substituted

If substitutions are made for non-disabilities, they must be provided at no additional charge. Discuss with your school district how they choose to accommodate non-disability medical or special dietary needs.

Non-Medical Special Dietary Needs

The school foodservice department is encouraged, but not required, to accommodate special dietary needs that are not medically related. This includes religious or cultural beliefs and food preferences (i.e. vegetarian, vegan, food dislikes, and gluten-free diets that aren't medically indicated). Discuss with your school district how they accommodate non-medical special dietary needs. If these requests are accommodated, follow the same guidelines above for *Non-Disability Medical or Special Dietary Needs*.

Accommodating Special Dietary Needs

If it is determined that a special dietary need is to be accommodated, SFE onsite management teams must work closely with school officials to provide the appropriate substitutions. Follow these steps:



1. Obtain a completed medical statement or special diet form. Ensure this form is filled out completely, accurately, and signed by an appropriate medical authority.
 - a. The special diet form provides what the requirements are for the reimbursable meal for that student.
 - b. Special diet forms do not need to be renewed on a yearly basis; however, schools are encouraged to ensure that the diet orders reflect the current dietary needs of the child.
 - i. If a child no longer needs a meal modification, USDA recommends maintaining documentation when ending a meal accommodation. For example, having the parent or guardian sign a statement indicating the child no longer needs meal modifications.
 - c. The exception to this is for milk substitutions for a non-disability—a parent request for a milk substitute is acceptable.
2. If necessary, contact the student, parents, and/or legal guardians to discuss food preferences. This will help with menu planning and food purchasing.
3. If necessary, purchase some special foods, such as gluten-free items, lactose-free milk or soy milk.
4. Train the kitchen staff on the appropriate substitutions or other precautions, such as cross-contact and signs and symptoms of an allergic reaction.
5. Plan the menu. Best practice is to modify the regular menu, when possible. This allows the students to receive foods that are similar to what the rest of the students are receiving, decreases additional labor for staff, and avoids unnecessary additional costs.
 - a. Menus for special diets do not need to be entered into HMPP.
 - b. Best practice is to document substitutions on the production record to account for the additional meals prepared and served.

SFE has provided guides to accommodating the most common special dietary needs, including diabetes, gluten-free, milk allergies, lactose intolerance, and texture modification. These guides include much of the information needed to accommodate these diets. They can be found on the SFE website under [Menus & Nutrition](#) → [Special Dietary](#).

At any time during this process, you may contact your CN Ops team for assistance with properly accommodating special dietary needs.