

National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity

Nutritional Quality of School Meals

The nutritional quality of meals served as part of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) significantly improved between 1992 and 1998.¹ However, schools need additional support to continue to make school meals more healthful and appealing to children.

School meals must meet nutrition standards in order for a school food service program to receive federal subsidies. Standards include that school meals must contain 30% or less of calories from fat and less than 10% of calories from saturated fat. In addition, school lunches must provide one-third of the Recommended Daily Allowances (RDA) for protein, calcium, iron, Vitamins A and C, and calories and school breakfasts must provide one-fourth of the RDA for those nutrients.

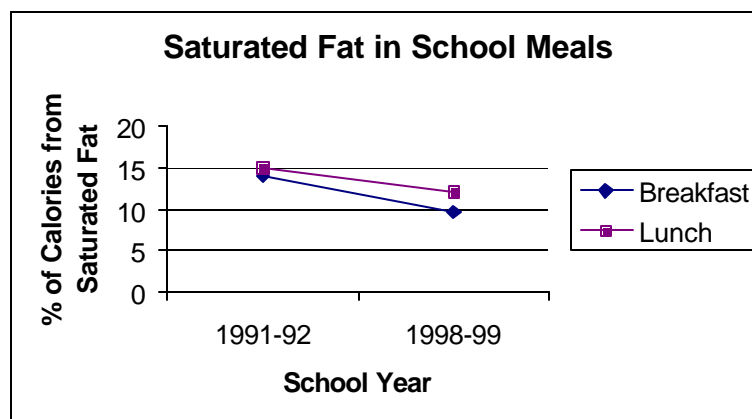
In late 1993, USDA began a major reform of the school meal programs known as the “School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children” (SMI) with the central purpose of improving the nutritional content of school lunches and breakfasts. USDA allows schools and districts to select from five menu-planning options to meet the new nutrition standards. The options are: Nutrient Standard Menu Planning (NSMP), Assisted Nutrient Standard Menu Planning (ANSMP), Enhanced Food-Based Menu Planning, Traditional Food-Based Menu Planning, and Alternative Menu Planning. NSMP and ANSMP use computer nutrient analysis. The other two menu planning options – enhanced food-based and traditional food-based – plan menus based on prescribed portion sizes of foods from key food groups.

❖ **National School Lunch Program**¹

- *Targeted Nutrients:* Schools are doing an excellent job of providing lunches that include adequate amounts of key nutrients, including protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron (*i.e.*, they provide one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowances [RDA]). In addition, school lunches offered in the 1998-99 school year (SY) provided more iron, vitamin A, vitamin C, and calcium than did lunches in SY 1991-92.
- *Calories:* Elementary schools met the goal of providing 33% of a day's calories in the average lunch. Secondary school lunches provide 30% of a day's calories.
- *Fat:* Lunches offered in SY 1998-99 contained fewer calories from fat (33-34%) than lunches offered in SY 1991-92 (38%). In SY 1991-92, only one percent of schools provided lunches that met the dietary recommendation for fat (less than 30% of calories). By SY 1998-99, 22 percent of secondary schools and 18 percent of elementary schools met this recommendation.
- *Saturated Fat:* Lunches offered in SY 1998-99 contained fewer calories from saturated fat (12%) than did lunches offered in SY 1991-92 (15%). The recommended standard is that meals contain less than 10% of calories from saturated fat. In SY 1991-92, no schools met the recommendation for saturated fat content, but in SY 1998-99, 17% of secondary schools and 15% of elementary schools met that standard.
- *Cholesterol:* The average school lunch met the recommendation for cholesterol (100 milligrams [mg] per lunch or less). Lunches offered in SY 1998-99 contained less cholesterol

(68 mg per lunch in elementary schools and 75 mg per lunch in secondary schools) than lunches offered in SY 1991-92 (84 mg per lunch in elementary schools and 95 mg per lunch in secondary schools).

- *Sodium.* Lunches offered in SY 1998-99 contained less sodium (1,289 mg per lunch in elementary schools and 1,509 mg per lunch in secondary schools) than lunches offered in SY 1991-92 (1,399 mg per lunch in elementary schools and 1,641 mg per lunch in secondary schools). The average school lunch did not meet the recommended target of 800 mg of sodium.
- *Fruits and Vegetables:* Two or more fruit and vegetable choices are offered in about two-thirds of school lunches. Five or more fruit and vegetable choices are offered in more than 25% of school lunches.



❖ **School Breakfast Program¹**

Overall, schools do a good job in providing breakfasts that meet the recommendations for key nutrients, fat, and saturated fat.

- *Target Nutrients.* The average school breakfast provides one-quarter of a day's worth of all targeted nutrients. School breakfasts offered in both SY 1998-99 and SY 1991-92 provided more than the recommended amount of protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron.
- *Calories.* On average, school breakfasts provide 22% of the calories needed in a day, slightly below the 25% recommendation.
- *Fat.* School breakfasts meet the recommendation that less than 30% of calories in the average breakfast come from fat. In SY 1998-99, school breakfasts contained an average of 26% calories from fat, whereas in SY 1991-92 they contained an average of 31% of calories from fat and did not meet the recommendation.
- *Saturated Fat.* School breakfasts, on average, meet the recommendation to provide no more than 10% of calories from saturated fat. In SY 1998-99, breakfasts contained 10% of

calories from saturated fat and met the recommendation, whereas in SY 1991-92 they contained 14% and did not meet the recommendations.

- *Cholesterol:* The average school breakfast meets the recommendation to contain 75 mg of cholesterol or less. In SY 1998-99, elementary schools provided 39 mg per breakfast and secondary schools provided 45 mg per breakfast, which was a significant improvement from SY 1991-92 when both elementary and secondary school breakfasts contained an average of 73 mg of cholesterol per breakfast.
- *Sodium:* The recommend maximum content of sodium in school breakfasts is 600 mg. The average sodium content of elementary school breakfasts is 562 mg, which meets the recommendation. The average sodium content of secondary school breakfasts is 601 mg. Breakfasts in SY 1998-99 were significantly lower in sodium than breakfasts offered in SY 1991-92, when elementary school breakfasts contained an average of 657 mg of sodium and secondary school breakfasts contained 723 mg of sodium.
- *Fruits and Vegetables:* Greater than 50% of school breakfasts offered include more than one fruit, vegetable, or juice.

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) (2001). *School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study – II: Summary of Findings*. Accessed on January 10, 2003 at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/menu/published/cnp/files/sndaIIfind.pdf>. Findings from the USDA's *School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study – II* indicate how well the NSLP and SBP meals met nutrition guidelines in the 1998-99 school year (the most recent school year for which this study has been done) in comparison with the 1991-92 school year.