

Guidance Notes for School Meals Special Diet Requests

“Free from” diets

Catering Services will aim to provide “free from” diets based on medical, religious, ethical and cultural grounds, for example, gluten free, egg free, pork free. However, some ingredients may be at risk of containing traces of the offending substance due to factory contamination. Details of these products are available from Catering Services. You will need to provide your choices from the relevant ‘free from’ menu at least a week in advance so that the cook can make sure the required ingredients are ordered.

Foods containing offending substances that can be included in the diet

Some children with food allergies or intolerances can tolerate a small amount of the offending substance in a food. Also, someone with intolerance to something in one food (e.g. protein in milk, or gluten from wheat) may tolerate it well in another (e.g. yoghurt or oats). Please provide specific information on the form, including a list of actual foods.

How often would you like the special diet to be provided?

Some special diets are not easy to provide every day. Please have a look at the weekly menus. Some days may require very little alteration to the standard meal options. You might want to ask the school to provide a meal on the “easier days” and send a packed lunch on the other days. If you take this option, please ensure that the cook knows well in advance which days a meal needs to be provided.

Medical based diets not prescribed by a medical professional

If you are requesting a diet based on medical reasons but not prescribed by a medical professional (GP, Dietitian or Consultant), we strongly recommend that you discuss with your GP, so they are aware of the situation and can provide any necessary advice and supervision on providing a balanced diet.

Special Dietary Products

We use special dietary products where required, for example, gluten free pasta, baguettes, soya milk. Due to strict food and hygiene regulations, we only serve food prepared in our kitchens. We only accept food from home in exceptional circumstances.

Diabetes

Most children with diabetes have to control their intake of carbohydrate so that it is in proportion with their insulin dose. This means that carbohydrate based foods (like bread, rice, pasta, potatoes, fruit juice etc.) need to be weighed or measured carefully by the cook, before serving to the relevant child.

Children with diabetes should follow similar healthy eating guidelines to the rest of the population. Difficulties in controlling blood sugar and increased risk of cardiovascular disease mean that there is more likely to be harmful health consequences to poor diet than for the general population. Insulin regimes should be designed around the child's lifestyle (rather than the other way around).

Obesity

Children who are obese or overweight do not need a "special diet". The changes being implemented as a result of Hungry for Success will increase the number of appropriate choices and reduce the number of inappropriate choices for all children. This will have even greater benefit for overweight and obese children. There will be more choice of nutrient dense foods and less foods that are high in fat and added sugars.

Selective eaters

This term is used to describe children whose diets are unusually limited due to serious diagnosed psychological difficulties. For example, proportions of children on the Autistic Spectrum are exceptionally fearful of new foods and have very limited diets. In these cases, packed lunches are usually the best option. However, it may be possible for these children to enjoy a school lunch on days where the cook is able to make minor adaptations to the existing menu. For selective eaters who bring a packed lunch regularly, it may still be possible to provide a sample "taster" of something from the school menu, to try alongside the packed lunch.

The term 'selective eater' is not used to describe children who are simply fussy eaters.

Children requiring texture modification

Many children find that certain textures are difficult to manage. This may be because they have poor oral motor skills and find chewing and/or swallowing certain foods difficult. Learning to chew and swallow a range of textures is important for normal development of speech. Therefore, children who could manage a diet with more mixed, complex and challenging textures should be given such foods.

Vegetarian choice

We now have a daily vegetarian option on our menu. A special diet is therefore not required.

Severe Food Allergies

Some food allergies can be serious or even fatal. Nut allergy is the best known but it can apply to any food in a particular case. Some parents may wish to send their child to school with a nutritious food that is a known allergen to another child. For example, nuts are a good source of unsaturated fats, soluble fibre and vitamin E, all nutrients associated with a decreased risk of degenerative diseases. In schools where there is a child with a severe allergy to nuts, head teachers may request that nuts are not brought into the school either by staff or pupils. However, it is not practical or feasible to call the school a “Nut free zone”. This would give false re-assurance that cannot be guaranteed in practice. For example, schools cannot guarantee that every cereal bar in every packed lunch is nut free and it is not practicable to request other common allergens such as milk or egg are excluded from a school setting. In the example above it would be better to call the school a “nut aware” school. The child with a severe allergy must be taught by parents and school staff not to swap food with other children. The school should discuss with parents appropriate ways of reducing the chances of exposure to the offending substance (e.g. cleaning protocols).

Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Children with ASD are particularly likely to be highly selective in their food choices. This is often symptomatic of ASD. The child is not simply being fussy or awkward. There is a need for many ASD children to look for patterns, structure and repetition in many aspects of their lives including meal times. Also, many children with ASD are extremely susceptible to “sensory overload” from the noise, smells and visual stimulation of the dining room, and the texture, taste and smell of the food. Meal times therefore can be highly stressful. For some children with ASD, it is unrealistic to expect them to accept “healthy and nutritionally balanced” school menus immediately. Broadening the diet of such children is a difficult, painstaking task that requires persistence, patience and a measured approach. Caterers, learning support staff, parents and pupils should work together to develop a pragmatic and phased approach to dietary improvement.

Children with communication difficulties

Some children have difficulty reading but respond well to visual images. Others can read but find it difficult to establish a clear mental image of what that food will actually be like. Therefore, appropriate visual images of food choices should be available to help children decide what they want to eat.