

Serving Healthy School Food During COVID-19: A Guide

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THE COALITION
FOR HEALTHY SCHOOL FOOD

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Introduction

School food providers have had to adapt in many ways during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only have they had to figure out how to provide food to children and youth in ways that are COVID-safe, but many have also worked to maintain a focus on nutritious food.

Healthy food at school is important for the development of children and youth. It reduces their risk of health problems in later years and allows them to be better learners at school. Although pre-packaged foods are a convenient option as schools reopen, and many guidelines recommend their use, they may pose long term environmental and health concerns, as they are often highly processed and use single-use plastic. If your health and safety guidelines and policies allow, try to rely on packaged foods less often and prepare fresh foods as often as possible.

This guide is meant to encourage and inspire school food providers to use creative solutions to serve fresh, whole, and nutritious food to students in ways that are COVID-safe with as little use of packaged foods as possible. However, the information and suggestions presented are not meant to be prescriptive and should only be considered in the context of each individual program's current health guidelines and policies.

Being COVID Safe with Food

To date, there is no indication that COVID-19 can be spread through food and no confirmed cases from contact with food packaging [1,2,3]. However, it remains important to continue to be vigilant; follow safe food handling procedures and COVID-19 safety guidelines to reduce the risk of contamination by the virus and other foodborne illnesses, as well as to protect staff and students from spreading the virus amongst each other.

Your local Public Health Unit is a great resource to discuss the safest and most effective ways to modify your program to be COVID safe. A Registered Dietitian can also help ensure food safety and good nutrition are being maintained in your food program. You can find a Registered Dietitian near you at your local Public Health Unit or by following this link: [Find a Dietitian](#)

Safe Food Handling Procedures

Continue to follow food premises regulations and food safety procedures. Proper hand hygiene, physical distancing, and food safety measures are the most important precautions food handlers can take to protect against COVID [4].

- Provide staff with a refresher session on safe food handling procedures as well as COVID safety measures in place
- Practice good hand hygiene when preparing, serving, and eating food. Wash hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after eating, handling food or packaging
- Washing produce with soap, bleach, or other chemicals is **not recommended** as produce is porous and can absorb chemicals that are not safe for consumption [1]. Wash fresh fruits and vegetables the way you usually would under running water. If you're choosing canned goods, drain and rinse them before preparing or serving to reduce the sodium content.
- Cook foods to safe internal temperatures and use safe cooling and storing procedures. Coronaviruses are killed by normal safe cooking temperatures [1].
- Encourage staff, students, and volunteers to stay home when sick and don't allow anyone showing symptoms to participate in food handling.
- Regularly disinfect any surfaces (counters, food bins, etc.) that will come into contact with food or food packaging as well as frequently touched surfaces such as door handles.
- Gloves are no more effective than proper hand washing procedures and may create a false sense of security [4]. Consider the use of gloves carefully. Tongs are a good option to help serve food.

Physical Distancing

Maintaining physical distancing while preparing and serving food is important to prevent the spread of COVID among staff and students.

- Limit the number of staff in a preparation area to ensure physical distancing can be maintained.
- Assign workstations and work areas based on physical distancing. For example; avoid having staff face each other across a worktable during prep by staggering the stations; designate people to retrieve items from cold or dry storage areas based on your layout to minimize crowding.
- Schedule staff in teams or groups to reduce cohort sizes and facilitate contact tracing if necessary.



Image credit: Wong, J. (2020, October 13). School food programs pivot to feed students during COVID. CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/covid19-school-food-programs-1.5752019>

Suggestions for Modified Food Programs

Restricted to serve only pre-packaged food items?

- ▽ Check the nutrition facts label on the package and make sure it doesn't contain any artificial trans fats and is low in sodium and added sugar. A general rule of thumb is less than 5% is a little, 15% or more is a lot.
- ▽ Choose fruit cups packed in water, not juice or syrup
- ▽ See if your distributor offers pre-packaged slices of fruit and vegetables, cheese, and other products.
- ▽ Food prepared fresh may be wrapped prior to the point of service in materials such as food grade paper that can be recycled.
- ▽ Using reusable or recyclable bowls, cups, bags or other individual containers that can be cleaned and sanitized between uses may be acceptable alternatives to individually packaged items.

Eating in the classroom?

- ▽ Streamline the delivery process by having classes pre-order their items
- ▽ Have a designated staff member deliver meals to classrooms or have teachers pick up prepared bins of food for their classrooms.
- ▽ Teachers could distribute food to the students (place items on their desks before they arrive, call them up one by one to retrieve their items, or hand them out as students enter the classroom).
- ▽ Having bins labeled can help to keep track of the bins going to and coming back from classrooms. Ensure proper sanitation of all bins. Breakfast Clubs of Canada has [Printable Bin Labels](#).



Image credit: Natoaganeg School, Eel Ground First Nation

Restrictions on student participation in meal preparation?

Food literacy skills are very important to create generations of students with the knowledge and tools to navigate the world of food for their health and for the sustainability of the planet. Engage students in learning about food and food systems by incorporating activities like:

- ▽ Growing bean plants in the classroom.
- ▽ Having students complete cooking challenges at home (for example, use an ingredient that is grown locally in your province as the star of your recipe).
- ▽ If students are able to eat in the classroom, incorporate activities where they describe the sensory properties of the foods they're eating.
- ▽ Have a new food challenge where students find one food they've never tried before and make a presentation about it or use it in a recipe.
- ▽ Use Canada's new Food Guide to have students create plate collages of foods. Have them make half their plate fruit and vegetables, ¼ whole grains, and ¼ protein foods. Incorporate themes of variety, balance, moderation, and adequacy.
- ▽ Sustain Ontario shares educational resources that have been developed by organizations from across Canada including a guide on making bee habitats and a pop bottle planter that can be found at: [Food Literacy and Food-Based Experiential Learning Resources in a Time of COVID-19 | Ontario Edible Education Network](#)
- ▽ Farm to Cafeteria also has a variety of resources for at home learning, including lessons and videos to engage students in learning about healthy, local food systems: [Learning about Food at Home: inspiration & resources in the time of COVID-19](#)
- ▽ Avoid including activities that have students classify foods as "healthy/unhealthy" or "good/bad" or other descriptions that place guilt and shame on certain foods.
- ▽ Avoid talking about food consumption in relation to weight. For example, tell students that food gives them energy to grow/develop and some foods help us develop more than others, not that foods will cause them to gain, lose, or maintain a certain weight. If unsure of how to approach conversations around food with your students, this [Toolkit](#) from the Saskatchewan Health Authority provides helpful resources

Not allowed volunteers on site to help with food preparation?

- See if volunteers can act as liaisons between local farms and the school to help deliver food products
- See if volunteers can help with food preparation off site in other inspected kitchens in the community. They may be able to help prepare vegetables and fruits, cheese slices and crackers, salads etc. for meals/snacks. Choose items that can be transported to the school using safe food transportation principles.
- Explore policies, such as those developed in Peterborough Ontario, where student nutrition program volunteers have been deemed essential workers like teachers and allowed in the schools to help prepare school food.

Meal and Snack Ideas

Canada's new Food Guide recommends that half your plate should be fruits/vegetables, a quarter should be whole grains, a quarter should be protein foods, and your drink of choice should be water [5]. It also highlights that eating is more than just what we put in our bodies, it is a social experience that should be enjoyed and stress free [5]. Therefore, it's important to provide students with enough time to eat (at least 20 minutes) so they're not rushed, and provide as pleasant an eating environment as possible to promote positive social skills.

Mix and Match Items From These 3 Lists to Create Snacks

Always make sure every snack or meal includes items from the fruit and vegetables column

Vegetables/Fruit

Fresh, frozen, or canned vegetables and fruit can all be healthy options!

- Local baby tomatoes (cut for younger children)
- Snap peas
- Sliced Bell peppers
- Sliced Cucumber
- Broccoli pieces
- Local baby carrots or carrot slices
- Celery
- Apple slices
- Bananas
- Clementines
- Grapes (cut for younger children)
- Berries (strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries)
- Unsweetened applesauce

Try making your own!

Protein Foods

Try incorporating plant based options!

- Hard boiled eggs
- Yogurt cups (unsweetened or low sugar)
- Kefir cups
- Cheese cubes
- Milk cartons
- Hummus
- Roasted chickpeas
- Cottage cheese
- Tuna or salmon
- Lean meat and poultry
- Beans (If canned, rinse and drain to reduce sodium)
- Lentils
- Fortified Soy beverages
- Tofu (careful with soy allergies)

Whole Grains

Make sure the ingredient list states "whole grain". Whole wheat and multigrain may not be whole grain, although they can be a healthy option as they contain fibre.

- Cereal
- Crackers
- Pita/Pita chips
- Naan
- English Muffins
- Oatmeal
- Granola bars (without chocolate pieces or dips)
- Brown or wild rice
- Quinoa (quinoa is great because it can be served in a hot dish and leftovers can be stored in an airtight container in the fridge and used to make a salad within 5 days)
- Couscous
- Brown rice cakes

Try making your own!

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Meal Ideas

Breakfast ideas:

- Oatmeal topped with milk and berries
- Whole grain cheerios, milk, and banana
- Whole grain english muffin, nut free butter (if in accordance with your school's anaphylaxis policy), and banana
- Sliced apples, yogurt for dipping, and whole grain granola bar
- Greek yogurt cup topped with nut-free granola and berries

Snack ideas (make sure all snacks are served with fruit and/or vegetables):

- Trail mix: whole grain cheerios, popcorn, dried fruit, salt free sunflower seeds, and oven roasted chickpeas
- Hummus, pita chips, bell pepper slices/broccoli/baby carrots/baby tomatoes
- Mini charcuterie: whole grain crackers, cheese cubes, and grapes
- Fruit salsa and whole grain cinnamon pita chips
- Tuna or salmon salad on whole wheat crackers with celery

Lunch ideas:

- Tuna, apple slices, grated carrot, and lettuce in a whole grain pita pocket
- Vegetarian chilli with beans, chickpeas, and lentils
- Burrito with beans and brown rice
- Lentil tacos with pico de gallo
- Chicken vegetable quesadillas using whole grain tortillas
- Chickpea and vegetable curry over brown/wild rice or quinoa
- Tofu vegetable stir fry over brown/wild rice or quinoa
- Whole grain english muffin pizzas with a side salad
- Add barley, bulgur and quinoa to soups, salads, and stir-fries



Image credit: Natoaganeg School, Eel Ground First Nation

Keeping Sustainability in Mind

It's important to continue to be mindful of how our food systems impact the environment, especially during COVID when some are calling for packaged foods that increase our use of single-use plastic. Below are some ways to support local food providers and reduce plastic waste:

- Consider supporting a local farmer by ordering produce or products from them
- Start a school garden and use the products grown in the kitchen. Engage students in the creation and tending of the garden.
- The food service sector has been hit hard by COVID, consider partnering with local food vendors or restaurants to have meals delivered (PEI is having local restaurants deliver meals to their schools: [Healthy School Lunch Program](#)).
- Be conscious of your plastic use. Where possible, consider more environmentally friendly packaging options such as food grade paper, reusable/recyclable containers and utensils.
- Choose locally grown produce as much as possible and plan your menus according to what is in season.
- Avoid food waste: bring out only as much food as is needed and restock when necessary so items are not exposed or left out too long and wasted.
- Tell students to put uneaten items in their lunch boxes for later
- Encourage students to bring their own reusable cutlery

Additional Resources

[Toolkit – Breakfast Program Adapted to COVID-19 Protocols](#)

(Breakfast Clubs of Canada. Includes helpful posters for schools, classrooms, and cafeterias)

[Printable Bin Labels](#) (Breakfast Clubs of Canada)

[Tips and Recipes for Quantity Cooking: Nourishing Minds and](#)

[Bodies](#) (Dietitians of Canada)

[Healthy eating at school](#) (Canada's Food Guide)

[Going the Healthy Route at School - Pamphlets](#) (Government of Quebec, Ministry of Education)

[School Health](#) (UnlockFood.ca)

[Serving Up Tradition: A Guide for School Food in Culturally Diverse](#)

[Communities](#) (Foodcorps Massachusetts and Massachusetts Farm to School)



Image credit: Natoaganeg School, Eel Ground First Nation

References

- [1] Government of Canada (2020, August 21). Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and food safety. [Education and awareness]. Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-nutrition/food-safety/covid19.html>
- [2] Government of Canada (2020, September 14). Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Prevention and risks [Education and awareness]. Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks.html#p>
- [3] World Health Organization (2020, August 14). Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Food safety and nutrition. Retrieved from: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/food-safety-and-nutrition>
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- [5] Government of Canada (2020, March 17). Canada's Food Guide. <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/>

