

Healthy Eating Research Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System

In 2019, *Healthy Eating Research (HER)*, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, convened a panel of experts in the charitable food system, nutrition, and food policy fields to create clear, specific recommendations for evidence-based nutrition guidelines tailored to the unique needs and capacity of the charitable food system. The intent of these recommendations is to improve the quality of foods in food banks and pantries in order to increase access to and promote healthier food choices. More information about the expert panel methodology and the detailed recommendations can be found in the full report at: <http://healthyeatingresearch.org>.

Nutrition, Food Insecurity, and Health

Food insecurity is defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. In 2018, approximately 1 in 9 U.S. households experienced food insecurity. Extensive research has shown that food insecurity is a complex problem, with many food insecure families also experiencing other challenges, such as a lack of affordable housing, low wages, insufficient transportation, and fewer social supports. People living in food insecure households face a number of barriers to eating healthy that make them vulnerable to diet-related chronic diseases, including obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. In recent years, strategies to address food insecurity have focused on interventions that simultaneously support food access and health.

Charitable Food System

Federal programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) are the first line of defense against food insecurity in the United States. However, these benefits are often not sufficient to meet all of the food needs of people living in food insecure households. The charitable food system—a network of food banks, food pantries, and meal programs—fills this gap by distributing billions of pounds of food annually. Thus, it's important to consider the nutritional quality of foods and beverages moving through the charitable food system.

Traditionally, many of the foods and beverages moving through the charitable food system are shelf-stable, highly processed foods that tend to be high in saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars. In recent years, many of the organizations working in the charitable food system have prioritized sourcing and supplying healthier foods. As a result, various nutrition ranking systems for the charitable food system have been developed to categorize foods based on specific ingredients or nutrient criteria; however, there are many inconsistencies in how these systems categorize items and rank products based on nutrient values. These inconsistencies create challenges and confusion for food bank (and pantry) staff, volunteers, clients, and donors.

Importance of Common Definitions

There are several important reasons to work toward a common set of nutrition criteria in the charitable food system, but the drivers behind this expert panel's task include the idea that alignment on common nutrition principles across the charitable food system can guide conversations with donors about which items food banks prefer to distribute; discussions with policymakers about strategies to incentivize healthier donations; and decisions concerning how food banks should use their limited dollars to purchase foods. In addition, consistency increases the ease of implementation at food banks, food pantries, and meal programs across the country.

Key Recommendations

The expert panel's key recommendations are summarized in the following table. Products are divided into 11 categories; and within categories, items are ranked into tiers of “choose often” (green columns), “choose sometimes” (yellow columns), and “choose rarely” (red columns) based on saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar nutrient thresholds. Product examples are provided for each of the 11 food categories to illustrate the types of items that would fall into each category. Additional details can be found in the full report.

The expert panel chose to focus primarily on these three nutrients to limit – saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar – based on evidence linking increased consumption to increased risk for diet-related chronic diseases, including obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease. The current thresholds for each are based on nutrients found in a single serving of food. Anchoring the guidelines to serving size allows straightforward identification of necessary information on the Nutrition Facts Label, and should make the system easier to implement.

Additional information on the food category definitions, the rationale for the expert panel's decisions, and key considerations for implementation can be found in the full report.

Nutrition Guidelines for Ranking Charitable Food

Food Category*	Example Products	Choose Often			Choose Sometimes			Choose Rarely		
		Saturated Fat	Sodium	Added Sugar**	Saturated Fat	Sodium	Added Sugar**	Saturated Fat	Sodium	Added Sugar**
Fruits and Vegetables	Fresh, canned, frozen, and dried fruits and vegetables, frozen broccoli with cheese sauce, apple sauce, tomato sauce, 100% juice, 100% fruit popsicle	≤2 g	≤230 mg	0 g	All 100% juice and plain dried fruit			≥2.5 g***	≥480 mg	≥12 g
					≥2.5 g***	231-479 mg	1-11 g			
Grains	Bread, rice, pasta, grains with seasoning mixes	First ingredient must be whole grain AND meet following thresholds:			≥2.5 g***	231-479 mg	7-11 g	≥2.5 g***	≥480 mg	≥12 g
		≤2 g	≤230 mg	≤6 g						
Protein	Animal (beef, pork, poultry, sausage, deli meats, hot dogs, eggs) and plant proteins (nuts, seeds, veggie burgers, soy, beans, peanut butter)	≤2 g	≤230 mg	≤6 g	2.5-4.5 g	231-479 mg	7-11 g	≥5 g	≥480 mg	≥12 g
Dairy	Milk, cheese, yogurt	≤3 g	≤230 mg	0 g	3.5-6 g	231-479 mg	1-11 g	≥6.5 g	≥480 mg	≥12 g
Non-Dairy Alternatives	All plant-based milks, yogurts and cheeses	≤2 g	≤230 mg	≤6 g	≥2.5 g	231-479 mg	7-11 g	≥2.5 g	≥480 mg	≥12 g
Beverages	Water, soda, coffee, tea, sports drinks, non-100% juice products	0 g	0 mg	0 g	0 g	1-140 mg	1-11 g	≥1 g	≥141 mg	≥12 g
Mixed Dishes	Frozen meals, soups, stews, macaroni and cheese	≤3 g	≤480 mg	≤6 g	3.5-6 g	481-599 mg	7-11 g	≥6.5 g	≥600 mg	≥12 g
Processed and Packaged Snacks	Chips (including potato, corn, and other vegetable chips), crackers, granola and other bars, popcorn	None			If a grain is the first ingredient, it must be a whole grain AND meet following thresholds:			≥2.5 g	≥141mg	≥7 g
		0-2 g	0-140 mg	0-6 g						
Desserts	Ice cream, frozen yogurt, chocolate, cookies, cakes, pastries, snack cakes, baked goods, cake mixes	None			None			All desserts		
Condiments and Cooking Staples	Spices, oil, butter, plant-based spreads, flour, salad dressing, jarred sauces (except tomato sauce), seasoning, salt, sugar	Not ranked								
Miscellaneous Products	Nutritional supplements, baby food	Not ranked								

* Definitions of food product categories are included in the text of the full report.

**Use the added sugar value when available on the Nutrition Facts Label. If it is not available, use the total sugar value. The thresholds are the same for all categories except fruits and vegetables and dairy. For both fruits and vegetables and dairy, total sugar thresholds are ≤12 grams for the “choose often” tier, 13 to 23 grams for the “choose sometimes tier,” and ≥24 grams for the “choose rarely” tier.

*** The threshold for saturated fat is the same for the “choose sometimes” and “choose rarely” categories. All saturated fat values ≥2.5 grams should be ranked as “choose sometimes.” The overall ranking is based on the lowest tier of any nutrient. Thus, a grain with 3 grams of saturated fat (“choose sometimes”), 300 milligrams of sodium (“choose sometimes”), and 13 grams of added sugar (“choose rarely”) would fall into the “choose rarely” tier, while a grain with 3 grams of saturated fat (“choose sometimes”), 300 milligrams of sodium (“choose sometimes”), and 10 grams of added sugar (“choose sometimes”) would fall into the “choose sometimes” tier.

Notes: Tiers can be communicated as “choose often,” “choose sometimes,” and “choose rarely,” or with green, yellow, and red visual cues, according to local preference. Overall food product rankings are determined by the lowest tier of any nutrient. For example, a product that is ranked green (“choose often”) for saturated fat, yellow (“choose sometimes”) for sodium, and red (“choose rarely”) for added sugar would receive a final ranking of red (“choose rarely”).