

# FOOD ALLERGY FACT SHEET

## Common Questions: School Nutrition Directors

### Is the school required to make accommodations for all students with food allergies?

Any food allergy may be a disability depending on an assessment by a state licensed healthcare professional, such as a physician. All food allergies, whether life-threatening or not, may be considered a disability. School nutrition programs are required to make reasonable accommodations for disabilities. Other medical or special dietary needs may also be considered a disability. This, too, depends on the medical assessment of a state licensed healthcare professional. School nutrition programs are encouraged, but not required to make food substitutions for students with special dietary needs that are not considered disabilities.

### Why is documentation required for students with food allergies?

Proper documentation is needed to make sure accommodations are being made to keep students with food allergies safe. Documentation is required to receive reimbursement for meals that do not follow the required meal pattern.

### What documentation is needed to make accommodations for a student with food allergies?

A student with food allergies or special dietary needs that are considered a disability and whose required modification does not meet the meal pattern must have a medical statement from a state licensed healthcare professional, such as a physician. Information that needs to be provided must include the following:

- the child's physical or mental impairment that is sufficient to allow the child nutrition staff to understand how it restricts the child's diet (in this situation a food allergy),

- an explanation of what must be done to accommodate the child's disability, and
- the food or foods to be omitted and recommended alternatives, in case a substitution or modified meal is needed.

School nutrition offices are encouraged to make the process of requesting a meal modification as simple and straightforward as possible. For example, they are encouraged to include information about modification requests when sending out applications for free and reduced-price school meals, in student handbooks, on the district's website, or in the same place where school lunch menus are posted.

If a meal modification for a child's disability can be made within the program meal pattern, a medical statement is not necessary, and USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) does not require child nutrition departments to obtain a medical statement. However, State agencies and/or school districts may choose to require a medical statement in this situation. Check with your State agency before changing any policies. It is also best practice to document what procedures and processes are done to protect the child.

### To what length must school nutrition operations go to accommodate a child with a food allergy?

If a child's food allergy is considered a disability, a school must make a reasonable accommodation to provide an allergen-free meal to the student and a safe environment in which to consume the meal. The school nutrition staff must work closely with parents and the school community to determine how best to meet the dietary needs of the child.



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## If making substitutions for students with food allergies costs extra money, where can I get funding?

A school cannot charge a student with allergies more than it charges other students. Extra expenses can be minimized by choosing an allergen-free menu from the items already being offered. Additional funds could come from the school's general fund, or from resources listed in USDA's *Accommodating Children with Disabilities in the School Meal Programs: Guidance for School Food Service Professionals*.

## Can I use a website to check food labels for allergens?

Although labeling information posted on websites can be helpful, they may not be up to date. To make sure a product is safe, read the ingredients label each time you receive it and call the manufacturer if you have questions.



## References

- Institute of Child Nutrition. (2016). *Serving safe food to students with food allergies sample SOP*. <https://theicn.org/foodsafety>
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