Limiting Sodium, Saturated Fat, Empty Calories, and Refined Grains in Menus

The 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) emphasizes a diet should be high in nutrient dense foods. This provides individuals with vitamins, minerals, and other health-promoting components that have little added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium. When meal planning, nutrient dense food options that provide vitamins and minerals should always be the priority.

# Sodium

Sodium is needed, in small amounts, for the body to work properly. Diets high in sodium can lead to high blood pressure, which increases risk of cardiovascular diseases. It can also affect kidney function and increase swelling and water retention for those who are sensitive to sodium. According to the DGAs, 94% of male and 72% of female older adults exceed the daily recommended sodium intake. Limiting sodium will help individuals improve their health.

Tips for reducing sodium in the menu**:**

* Choose no added salt or reduced sodium products.
* Limit foods that have hidden sodium, such as cottage cheese, processed cheese, and processed meats.
* Add in plant-based proteins that are lower in sodium and saturated fats compared to processed meats, poultry, and seafood.
* Use herbs and spices, rather than salt.
	+ Rosemary, garlic, basil, chili/cayenne, cumin, oregano, paprika, thyme, and turmeric
* Seek guidance from a nutrition expert to help you develop your menus to meet lower sodium targets.

Example:

Maryland Policy Highlight: Sodium in the Protein Food should not exceed 1,000 mg per serving.

# Saturated Fat

Fat is an essential part of the diet, but some fats are better choices than others. A diet high in saturated fats can increase the risk of heart disease, weight gain, and high cholesterol. According to the DGAs, 80% of male and 77% of female older adults exceed the daily recommended saturated fat intake. When choosing the type of fat used in cooking, unsaturated fat is preferrable to saturated fats. Some examples of saturated fat are coconut oil, palm oil, and butter.

Tips for reducing saturated fat in the menu:

* Use olive oil, peanut oil, soybean oil, or canola oil in cooking.
* Select leaner meats (skinless chicken) and low-fat or fat-free (skim) milk.
* Offer desserts that are low in saturated fat, such as fruit crisp and angel food cake.

# Low Nutrient Density (Empty Calories)

Low-nutrient density foods are high in added sugar, saturated fat, and sodium, while having little vitamins, minerals, and other health-promoting components. These foods are high in calories that have little benefit for health. A diet high in low-nutrient foods can lead to weight gain, health conditions (such as high cholesterol), and vitamin and mineral deficiencies.

Tips for reducing low-nutrient density food in the menu:

* Use fats and oils sparingly.
* Serve unprocessed foods, such as raw vegetables.
* Choose low-sugar or no sugar added foods, like fruits and whole grains.
* Do not include desserts as part of the meal pattern, or limit the frequency.
* Limit sweet bakery products to once a week.

# Refined Grains

Refined grains have had the bran and germ removed. When removing the bran and germ, dietary fiber, iron, and B vitamins are lost. Whole grains contain all three parts of a grain: bran, germ, and endosperm. Seventy-four percent of Americans exceed limits for refined grains. Limiting refined grains is important because high amounts in the diet can lead to weight gain, type 2 diabetes, and decreased cardiovascular health.

Tips for reducing refined grains in the menu:

* Choose whole-grain products, which include oatmeal, brown rice, and whole-wheat bread.
* Stay away from white rice, white pasta, and white bread.
* Look for the whole-grain stamp on food products, shown below.



# Nutrition Education

Many older adults depend on convenience foods to help with meal preparation. This can increase overall sodium, fat, and added sugar intake during the day. Providing nutrition education can help participants to understand, if one meal has a higher sodium content during the day, it is recommended that the other meals are lower in sodium to help decrease overall sodium intake. Nutrition education can help participants understand why they should decrease sodium, fat, and sugars in their meals. See the [Nutrition Resource Center for Nutrition and Aging, Program Basics](https://acl.gov/senior-nutrition/program-basics) for more resources.

# Resources

[Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2021-03/Dietary_Guidelines_for_Americans-2020-2025.pdf)

[Food Essentials: Fat](https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/food-essentials/fat-salt-sugars-and-alcohol/fat) (Australian Government Department of Health)

[Sodium in Your Diet](https://www.fda.gov/food/nutrition-education-resources-materials/sodium-your-diet) (FDA)

[Start Simple with MyPlate Today](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2021-03/DGA_2020-2025_StartSimple_withMyPlate_English_color.pdf) (USDA)

[Tips for Reducing Sodium without Reducing Flavor](https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/nutrition/NRCNA_SodiumPracticeBrief_Final_508.pdf) (NRCNA)

[Whole Grains Council](https://wholegrainscouncil.org/)

# Highest Food Sources of Sodium, Saturated Fat, Empty Calories, and Refined Grains in SNP Menus

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Sodium** | **Saturated Fat** | **Low-Nutrient Density****(Empty Calories)** | **Refined Grains** |
| -Sandwiches -Mixed dishes with meat, poultry, and seafood -Cured meats and poultry-Soups -Sweet bakery products -Mashed potatoes  | -Sandwiches with highly processed meats-Added fats and oils-Sweet bakery products -Whole milk-Mixed dishes with meat, poultry, or seafood -Meats | -Sweet bakery products -Frozen dairy desserts, pudding, and gelatin -Added fats and oils -Sweetened beverages | -Sweet bakery products -Sandwiches -Breads, rolls, and tortillas -Grain based mixed dishes -Quick breads and breads |

*Adapted from* [*ACL Issue Brief: Key Food Sources of Sodium, Saturated Fat, Empty Calories, and Refined Grains in the Diets of Program Participants*](https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/programs/2019-01/AoA_Issue_Brief_Food_Sources.pdf)*.*

*Disclaimer: All resources provided are from government websites or have been gathered from the National Agricultural Library.*