

Healthy Eating Advisory Service

Investing in best practice healthy menus

Early childhood

Management

The critical role of nutrition in early childhood

Nutrition in early childhood is important, as children are growing rapidly and creating lifelong eating habits.

With many children spending up to 30 hours a week in long day care and some receiving up to 70% of their daily nutrition needs while in care, it is essential that menus provide the right nutrition to support them to grow, play and learn.

Achieving this requires a whole service approach, where cooks, educators and leadership all play a role in creating a healthy food environment.



Meeting quality standards with the Menu planning guidelines for long day care

The Menu planning guidelines for long day care are based on the Australian Dietary Guidelines and support long day care services to meet nutrition and quality standards.

Menus that follow the guidelines:

- Provide children with adequate nutrition to support growth, health and wellbeing
- Promote positive mealtime experiences and consistent age-appropriate food messages
- Help centres meet national regulations and achieve accreditation benchmarks

The Menu planning guidelines align with frameworks and initiatives including:

- Element 2.1.3 of the National Quality Standard - Healthy eating and physical activity are promoted and appropriate for each child
- Education and Care Services National Law and Regulations
- Healthy Places Healthy Futures - Food, Nutrition and Oral Health action areas
- The Smiles 4 Miles - Award program promoting healthy eating and oral health

What you can do to ensure your centre is meeting the guidelines

Developing and maintaining healthy menus requires time, training and support. Here is how you can support your staff:

01 Allocate time for menu planning

Ensure your centre chef or cook has allocated, paid time during work hours to plan menus that align with the guidelines. This is a standard expectation in long day care services.

Consult your cook to understand their needs and involve them in decisions. To ensure menus meet guidelines and reduces pressure on staff they may request time to review guidelines, review recipes, gather information and plan the menu.

02 Deliver adequate budget

Ensure your cook has the financial resources needed to plan and prepare menus that are aligned with the guidelines.

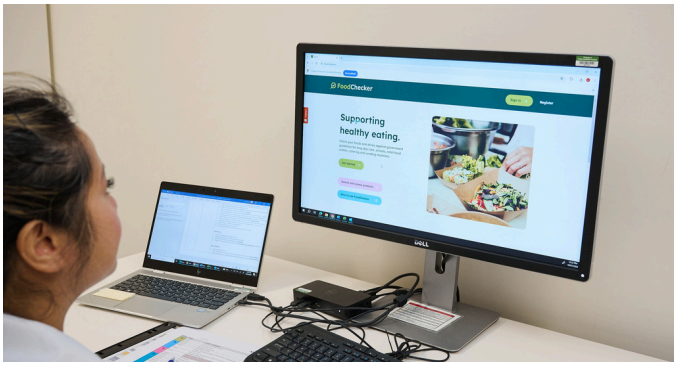
Research shows that spending an extra 50c per child per day can significantly improve the quality of food provided to children and compliance towards nutrition guidelines. [1]

03 Dedicate time for FoodChecker menu assessments

Encourage and support your cooks and/or chef to use FoodChecker, a free online menu assessment tool that helps plan, assess and improve menus in line with the Menu planning guidelines for long day care.

Foodchecker provides instant feedback and practical suggestions to help create healthier menus that meet the guidelines.

Visit the FoodChecker website to learn more.



04 Commit to professional development

Provide dedicated time during work hours for all relevant staff to complete training. This helps build skills and confidence in planning menus that meet nutrition guidelines.

The Healthy Eating Advisory Service have a free Planning healthy menus for long day care online training.

→ 05 Champion participation in Cooks Networks

Support your cooks to attend local Cooks Network meetings by allocating paid time during work hours. These free peer support sessions run by Health Promotion Officers offer valuable opportunities to:

- Access free professional development to strengthen knowledge and skills in planning menus that meet guidelines
- Connect with other cooks to collaborate, share ideas and practical solutions
- Feel supported, valued and connected in their professional role



Use HEAS's free tools and advice to support best practice menus

The Healthy Eating Advisory Service provides free tools, resources and personalised support to help your centre meet the Menu planning guidelines for long day care.

- Free online training: including planning healthy menus and food allergy modules
- Menu planning guidelines and templates: practical tools to support compliance
- Sample menus: examples that align with the guidelines
- Recipes: recipes that are aligned with the guidelines
- FoodChecker: free online menu planning and assessment tool
- Infoline support: tailored advice via phone or email
- Cooks Network directory: peer support and professional development

References:

1. Sambell, R., Wallace, R., Lo, J., Costello, L., & Devine, A. (2020). Increasing Food Expenditure in Long Day-Care by an Extra $0.50 Per Child/Day Would Improve Core Food Group Provision. Nutrients, 12(4), 968. https://doi.org/10.3390/nu12040968

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