

Guidelines for Choosing Foods

The foods and recipes suggested in this guide are chosen based on their accessibility and affordability for the limited-resource families that Cooking Matters serves. We recommend using the recipes included here whenever possible, but the guide leaves plenty of flexibility for choosing your own foods as needed. When doing so, be sure to consider kids' food allergies, budgetary constraints, cooking skills, and access to ingredients. The following guidelines can help you select appropriate foods.

1. Use low-cost foods and ingredients.

Try to avoid using expensive ingredients that kids and their families may not have access to or cannot afford, for example, uncommon or out-of-season fruits and vegetables, or herbs and spices that wouldn't be found in a typical pantry.

2. Use ingredients that are accessible to kids.

Keep in mind where kids and their families are likely to shop. If an ingredient is generally not found in an inner-city supermarket, it may not be a good choice — or you'll need to offer a more readily available ingredient as a substitute.

3. Use ingredients that are tasty and nutritious.

Keep simple nutrition messages in mind, for example:

- Vary the forms, types, and colors of fruits and vegetables.
- Substitute whole grains for enriched when possible.
- Use low-fat or fat-free versions of dairy products.
- Flavor with spices and herbs instead of heavy sauces and salt.
- Bake, grill, or steam instead of frying.
- Use canola oil or olive oil instead of margarine.

4. Try to use nonperishable food items.

Ingredients such as canned or dried beans, grains, peanut butter, and canned vegetables and fruit are good because they have longer shelf lives. These foods are often included in emergency food boxes, or are allowable in the Women, Infants, and Children food assistance program.

5. Use raw ingredients instead of preprocessed foods.

For example, use whole carrots instead of baby carrots, block cheese instead of grated cheese, and whole broccoli instead of prepackaged. Convenience foods usually have a higher unit price than the raw forms.

6. Avoid food allergens for the kids in your group.

Food allergies can be associated with any food, but most reactions are triggered by just eight foods: milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, soy, wheat, peanuts, and tree nuts. Have parents or guardians document their kids' food allergies on the liability waivers sent home (page 11), or ask your community partner about known allergens for the kids in your group. Choose foods and recipes that avoid these allergens.

7. Limit the use of special equipment.

Many households don't have blenders, food processors, ice cream makers, or other specialized equipment. Choose foods and recipes that limit their use.