



MEALTIME MEMO

November
2025

HEALTHY COOKING

A nutritious meal starts with healthy ingredients, and how those ingredients are prepared or cooked is important. This *Mealtime Memo* explores ways to prepare nutritious meals in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) using healthy ingredients and cooking methods.



Healthy Cooking Methods

Many healthy cooking methods are available as part of a reimbursable meal. The most common are baking, blanching, broiling, poaching, roasting, steaming, or stir-frying. Choosing equipment such as an air fryer, microwave, or slow cooker can also aid in healthy cooking. In the CACFP, foods that are deep-fat fried onsite (food submerged in hot oil) cannot count toward a reimbursable meal.

Helpful Tips!

- For definitions and video demonstrations of healthy cooking techniques, visit the American Heart Association (AHA) [website](#).
- Additionally, check out the USDA [CACFP Halftime: Methods for Healthy Cooking](#) webinar, which focuses on preparing nutritious meals and snacks in the CACFP.
- For a glossary of cooking terms to help prepare healthy meals, refer to the AHA website: [Common Terminology for Healthy Cooking](#).

Retaining Nutrients in Fruits and Vegetables

Fruits and vegetables are rich in essential vitamins that help the body function properly, including boosting the immune system, aiding wound healing, and strengthening bones. However, preparation and cooking methods can reduce the availability of these vitamins. Here are tips to help retain nutrients while preparing and cooking fruits and vegetables.

Preparation

Many nutrients are found in the skin or beneath the surface of fruits and vegetables so excessive trimming can diminish their nutrient content.

- For fruits and vegetables with edible skins, such as apples, pears, and potatoes, wash or scrub them instead of peeling them to preserve nutrients.
- Peel or trim minimally for produce that is typically peeled or trimmed, such as carrots, cucumbers, and sweet potatoes.
- For leafy vegetables, such as lettuce and cabbage, try to use the outer leaves, unless they are wilted.





Cooking

Water-soluble vitamins, such as B and C, are particularly sensitive to cooking and easily dissolve in water, making them vulnerable to nutrient loss. When boiled, these vitamins can leach out of vegetables and are lost if the water is discarded. To minimize nutrient loss during boiling:

- Use a small amount of water and avoid overboiling.
- Save and use the nutrient-rich water in broths, gravies, sauces, soups, or stews. You can also boil grains like rice, quinoa, or pasta in vegetable water to include extra nutrients and flavor.
- Cook vegetables quickly.
- Rather than boil, choose to microwave, roast, stir-fry, sauté, or steam vegetables.

Cooking With Healthy Ingredients

Here are healthy ingredient substitutions to make dishes more nutritious:

- **Cook with basic ingredients:** Start with whole foods like raw vegetables, fruits, proteins, and whole grains, and prepare meals from scratch. This allows you to enjoy food in its natural state without added ingredients.
- **Choose healthier oils:** Choose oils rich in unsaturated fats, such as avocado, olive, or canola oil, instead of butter or lard, which contain saturated fats. For example, spray a pan with canola oil instead of butter when cooking food, such as scrambling eggs.
- **Use low-fat dairy:** Substitute skim, low-fat, or evaporated milk when making “cream” sauces or soups. Choose low-fat options for sour cream and cream cheese when possible.
- **Season with herbs and spices:** Increase the flavor of your food with herbs, spices, onions, garlic, and citrus (e.g., lemon juice) instead of salt, butter, or margarine. These ingredients add flavor without extra salt and provide antioxidants, which help your body fight disease.



You can create delicious, nutrient-rich meals by choosing cooking methods and ingredients that support a healthier lifestyle.

References

- American Heart Association. (2017, February 9). *Don't fry! Give healthy cooking methods a try*. <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/cooking-skills/cooking/techniques/healthy-cooking-methods>
- American Heart Association. (2024, August 13). *Common terminology for healthy cooking*. <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/cooking-skills/cooking/common-terminology-for-healthy-cooking>
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