Mealtime Memo

November 2026



HEALTHY SIPS: UNDERSTANDING JUICE IN THE CACFP

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends water and milk as the best drink choices for young children. While 100% juice can be part of a healthy diet, it should be limited and served wisely. This *Mealtime Memo* reviews the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) juice requirements and highlights what counts as juice, when and how to serve it, and why limiting juice helps support children's health.

Juice vs. Whole Fruits

Juice can be an easy way to serve fruits and vegetables, but it does not provide the same benefits as whole fruits. Whole fruits have **fiber**, which helps with digestion and keeps children full longer. Juice can be high in **natural sugars** and **extra calories** when served too often. Too much juice can:

- Lead to cavities
- Cause tummy troubles
- Replace healthier foods children need

Encourage **whole** fruits and vegetables to build good eating habits and support overall health.



CACFP Juice Guidelines

CACFP operators may serve juice, but there are rules:

- Juice must be 100% fruit or vegetable juice, full-strength, and pasteurized.
- You can count juice as a meal component at only one meal or snack per day.
- Juice made from concentrate is creditable if reconstituted to 100% juice.
- You may serve juice at snack if the other component is not a beverage (i.e., fluid milk).
- Juice cannot be part of reimbursable infant meals.

Creditable and Noncreditable Juice Options

Creditable:

- ✓ 100% fruit or vegetable juices (e.g., apple, grape, orange, tomato)
- ✓ Apple cider (100% juice and pasteurized)
- ✓ Frozen fruit juice bars (made with 100% fruit or juice)
- ✓ Pureed fruits and vegetables (credit as juice)

Check the label!
Only 100% juice counts toward meal components

Not Creditable:

- × Juice cocktails, punch, or drinks less than 100% juice (e.g., cranberry juice cocktail or fruit punch)
- × Lemonade or flavored drinks
- × Frozen fruit-flavored bars or popsicles (less than 100% juice)
- × Fruit-flavored waters



Juice Limits

Because whole fruits and vegetables offer more nutritional benefits than juice, the CACFP limits when juice can be served. Programs may only use juice to meet the fruit or vegetable component at **one meal or snack per day**. This rule applies to the entire program, not per child. For example, if you serve **separate groups**—like morning and afternoon children—you may only count juice as a meal component once that day.

However, if you serve the **same meal or snack in shifts** (such as snack at 1:30 p.m., 2:00 p.m., and 2:30 p.m.), you may count the juice as a meal component for all three shifts since they count as one meal service.

Juice and Smoothies

Smoothies can be a fun, healthy option, but there are some rules to keep in mind:

- Pureed vegetables and fruits served in a smoothie count as juice.
- Since you may only serve juice once per day, the smoothie counts as your one juice serving for the day.
- Smoothies cannot be credited toward the fruits or vegetables component for infants because juice is not creditable in the infant meal pattern.



Serve Smart, Serve Whole

Juice can be part of healthy meals, but whole fruits and vegetables are a better choice. Follow the CACFP requirements to ensure meals are creditable and children get the best nutrition possible.

Helpful Tips!

Resources:

- Serving Juice in Child Care: CACFP iTrain Simple Lesson Plan
- Vegetable and Fruit Requirements in the CACFP: Q&As
- Crediting Fruits in the Child Nutrition Programs Tip Sheet

References

Institute of Child Nutrition. (2021, August 25). *CACFP iTrain simple lesson plan: Serving juice in child care*. https://theicn.org/cacfp-itrain-simple-lesson-plans/training-scripts/Serving-Juice-in-Child-Care.pdf

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This project was funded using U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Administration grant funds. This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

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Suggested Reference Citation:
Institute of Child Nutrition. (2026). *Mealtime memo: Healthy sips: Understanding juice in the CACFP.* University, MS: Author.

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