

Catering for special dietary requirements: *A guide for schools and school caterers in England*

Introduction

This guide outlines the legal requirements and best practice for schools and their caterers when providing food and drinks for pupils with allergies and other special dietary requirements.

Special Diets

A special diet is one that cannot be selected freely from the main school lunch choices available. This could be due to an allergy, intolerance or other medical need; or because children are following a religious or cultural diet; or a vegetarian or vegan diet.

Are we required to cater for special diets?

Schools have a duty of care to their pupils, and must make arrangements for supporting pupils with medical conditions, as set out in Department for Education statutory guidance.¹

In December 2014, new allergen information laws came into effect. Schools (along with other food businesses) are required to provide allergen ingredients information for the food and drink they provide.² This information helps support children with allergies or intolerances to select options which are suitable for them.

Best practice:

Advice from the Department for Education states that schools should make reasonable adjustments for pupils with particular requirements, for example to reflect medical, dietary and cultural needs.³ School food menus are designed for the majority of the school population, so you may need to cater individually for children with special dietary needs. It's up to you to decide if this is feasible, but reasonable efforts should be made to cater for all pupils needs.

We recommend that all schools develop a policy and have a clear procedure to make sure all requests for a special diet are handled efficiently and appropriately. It's good practice for these requirements to be written into any contracts with your caterers.

¹ Department for Education (2014). Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions. Statutory guidance for governing bodies of maintained schools and proprietors of academies in England: www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-pupils-at-school-with-medical-conditions--3

² EU Food Information for Consumers Regulations 1169/2011: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX%3A32011R1169&from=en>

³ Department for Education (2015) School food in England - Departmental advice for governing bodies on the standards for planning and providing food in schools <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/standards-for-school-food-in-england>

An overview of special diets

Food allergies, intolerances and other special diets for medical reasons

Food allergies are when the body's immune system reacts unusually to a specific food, because it mistakenly perceives it as a threat. In children, common food allergies include milk, eggs, peanuts, nuts, fish and shellfish. Symptoms can include itching in the mouth, throat or ears, a raised itchy red rash (hives), swelling of the face, around the eyes, lips, tongue and roof of the mouth and vomiting. In the most serious cases, a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis, which can include breathing difficulties, light headedness and feeling like you are going to faint) can be life-threatening.

There is no cure for food allergies, so people with allergies need to avoid the foods to which they are allergic. It is important that children with suspected food allergies see their GP for referral to an allergy clinic for a formal diagnosis. Children with severe allergies may be given a device known as an auto-injector pen (e.g. epi-pen) containing a dose of adrenaline to be used in emergencies. The Department for Education would expect such arrangements to be set out in the child's individual healthcare plan.

Food intolerances are different from food allergies. Symptoms tend to appear more slowly, often several hours after eating the food. Symptoms can often include diarrhoea, bloating and stomach cramps. Unlike food allergies, food intolerances are not life-threatening.

Coeliac disease is not an allergy or intolerance. It is an autoimmune disease, where eating gluten triggers the immune system, damaging the lining of the gut and also affecting other parts of the body. Symptoms can include bloating, diarrhoea, nausea, wind, constipation, tiredness, headaches, mouth ulcers, sudden weight loss, hair loss and anaemia.

People with coeliac disease cannot eat foods containing gluten. Gluten is a protein found in wheat, rye, oats (unless specified as gluten free oats) and barley. Examples of foods containing gluten include bread, pasta, flour, breakfast cereals, cakes, biscuits and pastry. Gluten can also be found in many other processed foods, such as soups, sauces, and sausages. Traces of gluten can also be found in food where gluten is not an ingredient, because of cross-contamination from gluten-containing foods.

Other medical diets can include where children need to follow high energy or fat diets, or food with a modified texture to make it easier for them to chew and swallow. Schools and caterers should work closely with dietitians and other health professionals, parents and pupils where medical diets are required.

Religious and cultural diets

Many schools have a diverse population from different ethnic and religious groups. It is important to consider the dietary needs of these groups to ensure your service is popular and meets all children's needs. Children from minority ethnic or religious communities may follow specific dietary customs, and may exclude or prepare food in a particular way. A summary of dietary customs of different groups is available on the Trust's website, see the 'further advice and resources' section.

Vegetarian and vegan diets

Vegetarians do not eat meat, poultry, fish, shellfish or animal products such as lard or gelatine. There are three main types of vegetarian:

- Lacto-ovo-vegetarians eat both dairy products and eggs; this is the most common type of vegetarian diet.
- Lacto-vegetarians eat dairy products but not eggs.
- Vegans do not eat dairy products, eggs, or any other products derived from animals (e.g. honey).

Many schools include a vegetarian option as part of their menu every day, as vegetarian diets are relatively common. Vegetarian dishes can also be eaten by non-vegetarian pupils too.

Procedure for managing requests for a special diet

- 1.** Request information from the child's parent/carer, so you are aware of the child's diet, and the food they can/cannot eat. You could produce a standard form to collect this information when you receive a request for a special diet.

If a special diet is requested for medical reasons, request written confirmation of the allergy/medical need from the child's GP, dietitian or other medical professional to ensure children are not having foods removed from their diet without a diagnosed medical need. If a child has a medical condition requiring a special diet, they are likely to have an individual healthcare plan drawn up by the school, following the DfE statutory guidance. This should contain all the necessary information to manage the child's medical condition effectively, including dietary requirements and action to be taken in an emergency.

- 2.** Communicate with the child's parent/carer (and medical professionals if required) to write and agree a clear plan of how to manage the child's allergy/special dietary requirement in school. This information should be incorporated into the child's individual healthcare plan where they have one and this could include identifying foods from the existing school menu that are appropriate for their child, how existing recipes could be adapted to make them suitable or how suitable foods can be prepared or supplied for them. The individual healthcare plan should also cover what action to take if the child has an allergic reaction in school. If the child does not have an individual healthcare plan, other arrangements will be needed to ensure that information about what action to take in an emergency is available.

- 3.** Fully inform all catering and teaching staff (including midday supervisors). Ensure staff fully understand about individual children's special dietary requirements, and how these are being met, so they can ensure appropriate food is provided. Make this information easily available for all staff, for example by displaying details and photos of children with special dietary requirements in the kitchen, behind the servery.

Consider whether catering and serving staff need training to understand different special diets and how to ensure children are provided with food appropriate for their needs.

- 4.** Ensure that the food you provide reflects the written recipes and allergen information, by making sure staff follow standard recipes, have a process in place to update ingredients and allergen information when products are changed or reformulated, and cross-contamination is avoided with good hygiene (effective cleaning practices) as well as separation and labelling of ingredients.

- 5.** Ensure that staff know how to deal with a severe allergic reaction:
 - a.** Know the warning signs to look out for; it is not always clear, as symptoms may be similar to other serious conditions, but warning signs include difficulty breathing, swollen lips or mouth, or collapsing.
 - b.** If the above happens, do not move them. Call 999 immediately, describe what is happening and explain you think they may be having a serious allergic reaction or anaphylaxis.
 - c.** If the child has an individual healthcare plan in place, follow the procedure described in it. If they carry an adrenaline pen, retrieve it, and administer it/support them to administer it as described in their plan.

Further advice and resources

- Allergy UK children's allergy protocol for school and childcare settings
website: www.allergyuk.org/childcarers-and-teachers/allergy-protocols
- Anaphylaxis Campaign advice for schools
website: www.anaphylaxis.org.uk/schools/help-for-schools
- BSACI template allergy management plans can be downloaded from
website: www.bsaci.org/about/download-paediatric-allergy-action-plans
- Children's Food Trust webpage on catering for special dietary requirements
website: www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk/specialdiets
- Children's Food Trust Food customs of different religious and cultural groups
website: www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk/specialdietresources
- Coeliac UK information about coeliac disease
website: www.coeliac.org.uk/home/
- Department for Education statutory guidance on supporting pupils at school with medical conditions
website: www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-pupils-at-school-with-medical-conditions--3
- Food Standards Agency resources to support businesses to provide allergen information
website: www.food.gov.uk/allergen-resources
- NHS Choices information about food allergies
website: www.nhs.uk/conditions/food-allergy/Pages/Intro1.aspx
- Vegan Society information on vegan diets
website: www.vegansociety.com/
- Vegetarian Society information on vegetarian diets
website: www.vegsoc.org/

The Children's Food Trust

The Children's Food Trust aims to reduce childhood obesity and malnutrition and enhance educational performance through improving the food our children eat in early years settings, schools and beyond.

We work with health and education commissioners in local authorities, and directly with early years settings, schools, parents and children across the country. We run the UK's biggest network of cooking clubs and, under our previous name of the School Food Trust, we were directly responsible for developing and introducing the national food and nutrition guidelines in both schools and early years settings. We make a difference, and would be pleased to help you too.

Contact us

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