

Institutional nutrition standards

WHAT IS IT?

Institutional nutrition standards aim to improve the health of food served by organizations to their client populations. This intervention focuses primarily on government standards.

Nutrition standards can be developed for government agencies or private sector organizations. They can include standards for food purchased by the organization, for foods and meals served by the organization and for stores and vending machines on the property.

School nutrition standards are the most common. Standards can also be developed for other sites such as hospitals, child care centers, and worksites.

While nutrition standards include salt reduction, they are usually more holistic. Standards may include:

- Limits on salt, saturated fat, trans fat, sugars and calories
- Minimum servings of fresh fruit and vegetables, whole grains
- Requirements related to pricing, promotion and placement of some foods, such as restrictions on marketing foods high in salt or other unhealthy nutrients
- Guidance on meal service, water availability, and complementary nutrition education

RATIONALE

- Government agencies and other institutions serve food to large numbers of people every day, including vulnerable populations, such as children and hospital patients
- Nutrition standards can reinforce existing government priorities around improving nutrition, create opportunities for healthy food messaging, change norms, and create demand for foods with lower salt
- Children often cannot leave school or childcare centers to purchase other food and the food served is a significant part of their diet (5 – 15 meals per week)

HOW TO IMPLEMENT

1. Determine what agency has the authority to create mandatory institutional nutrition standards at national and local levels
2. Build a coalition across government agencies or ministries, possibly starting with a focus on children to increase political support
3. Conduct an assessment of current food preparation and procurement practices and policies
4. Define and enact policies in collaboration with other government agencies; provide model language and implementation support at the local level
5. Implementation
 - Create materials for food preparers, food service managers, and procurement contract managers
 - Train stakeholders, including policy makers and food vendors
 - Provide dedicated technical assistance and create repository of best practices
 - Encourage education and curriculum advocating for healthier foods and rationale for changes in food service
6. Evaluate implementation through review of procurement contracts, surveys, site visits, and potentially direct assessment of served food (i.e. composite analyses)

WHAT IS NEEDED

- High-level government commitment from multiple agencies and designated staff
- Project coordinator to convene agencies
- Nutritionist to develop and refine standards and to support recipe modification and implementation by government agencies
- Funding for trainings and materials

WHERE HAS THIS BEEN IMPLEMENTED

- The UK, Australia, the U.S., and many large cities have school nutrition standards in place for food both served and purchased (in vending machines and school stores). Despite variations in interventions, a 2014 literature review found that these strategies improved the healthfulness of purchased food.¹⁴
- New York City requires all city agencies to meet nutrition standards for an estimated 250 million meals and snacks served per year. These standards are comprehensive and address meals and snacks served, food and beverages available from vending machines, food sold in cafeterias, and food provided at meetings and events.¹⁵
- Chile has coupled school nutrition standards with front-of-pack labeling so that any foods that have warning labels for salt, sugar or saturated fat cannot be marketed in or near schools or to sell to children under 14.¹¹

