



# Nutrition and Aging Resource Center

## Building Emergency Shelf-Stable Meals

For Title III-C Older Americans Act (OAA) senior nutrition programs, decisions related to providing meals to older adults during emergencies are made at the state and local level. In the event of power outages, meal site closures, and other emergencies, many senior nutrition programs opt to distribute shelf-stable meals. This tip sheet provides ideas for nutrition programs that wish to create their own shelf-stable meals for participants.

Shelf-stable meals, in general, meet the following characteristics:

- Non-perishable (i.e., can safely be stored at room temperature)
- Ready-to-use or minimal preparation needed
- Meal sized portions
- Includes all meal components
- Meal items are easily identified through menus or instructions for use
- Require no – or a minimal – amount of client’s own food supply (may add sauces, flavorings)

The OAA requires SNP meals to meet state and local food safety and sanitation requirements, be appealing to older adults, comply with the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs), and provide:

- A minimum of 33.3% of the DRIs for one meal per day
- A minimum of 66.6% of the DRIs for two meals per day
- A minimum of 100% of the DRIs for three meals per day

The OAA indicates it is the role of state units on aging (SUAs) to establish policies and procedures, including those related to meeting the Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) and the DGAs. SUAs may delegate some responsibilities to area agencies on aging (AAAs) or local providers.

## Sodium Considerations for Building Emergency Meals

Attention to sodium content is essential for program participants managing health conditions such as high blood pressure and heart disease. High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke, both of which are leading causes of death in the U.S.

In 2021, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued final guidance for industry with voluntary targets for reducing sodium in commercially processed, packaged, and prepared foods over the next 2.5 years. Current targets and expected subsequent guidance will help Americans gradually reduce their sodium intake and increase the availability of lower-sodium foods.

Nutrition programs can increase the availability and acceptance of low-sodium emergency meals by:

- Informing suppliers about the specific products desired based on client preferences, organizational policies, and any sodium limits.
- Requesting suppliers inform them about any new lower sodium foods or foods that are reformulated to reduce sodium.
- Educating partners such as SUAs, AAAs, and local service providers, as well as SNP participants, about the new FDA sodium reduction efforts and the importance of lower sodium diets for the health of older adults.
- Including criteria in food specifications for reduced sodium content (i.e., reduced sodium, low sodium, salt /sodium free) for canned foods, crackers, and other foods.
- Specifying the use of reduced sodium foods in written contracts, requests for proposals, and other procurement processes.
- Using the Nutrition Facts label to identify and compare the sodium content of products.
  - Apply the 5/20 Guide to the Daily Values (DV) on the Nutrition Facts label to help identify higher and lower sodium foods (5% DV per serving is considered low; 20% DV is considered high).

## Tips for Building Shelf-Stable Emergency Meals

- Review all pertinent SUA, AAA, and local service provider nutrition standards, purchasing policies and procedures, budgetary constraints, group purchasing options, and other related issues that may limit or expand the types of foods you can provide.
- Determine roles and responsibilities for creating emergency meals.

- Determine where the emergency meals will be stored and their storage requirements.
- Before making any purchases, develop an emergency meal plan with your food supplier(s) in consultation with your staff or consultant dietitian (or other process for ensuring nutrition standards are met) to identify suitable food items in appropriate pack sizes.
- Request supplier assistance in identifying lower sodium foods. Label terms to look for include “reduced sodium,” “low sodium,” “no salt added,” or “heart healthy.”
- Ensure selected products meet the nutrient requirements for your state.
- Finalize the meal plan and prepare instructions to be provided with the emergency meals.
- Estimate the amount of food to purchase using historical data or current meal program enrollment. It is important not to buy more food than can be used effectively, keeping in mind expiration dates and storage.
- Rotate foods in storage to use the oldest inventory first by using the first-in, first-out method also known as “FIFO.”
- Consider donating unused food before it expires so it does not go to waste.

## Additional Considerations for Emergency Meals

Nutrition Services Incentive Program (NSIP) funding may be used to purchase or create emergency meals. For more information on NSIP see the document [Nutrition Services Incentive Program FAQ](#).

NSIP allocations may only be used to buy domestically produced foods that are a part of a meal. “Domestically produced” foods for senior nutrition programs are: food, beverages, and other food ingredients grown, processed, and prepared in the United States, including its territories or possessions, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, or the Trust Territories of the Pacific Islands.

More information on NSIP and domestically produced foods can be found at [FAQ: NSIP and Domestically Produced Food](#).

## Resources

[NRCNA Contracting Tips for Purchasing Meals 2020](#): Recommended process and consideration for sourcing meals.

[FAQ: Managing OAA Funded Senior Nutrition Programs During Emergencies](#): Frequently asked questions related to operating in times of emergency.

[Understanding Nutrition Requirements During COVID-19: DRIs and DGAs](#): Detailed information on nutrition requirements and how they've been affected by the pandemic.

[Guide for Menu Planning \(Iowa Department on Aging\)](#): Two-week shelf-stable menu, 10-meal grocery kit, and 20-meal shelf-stable emergency response kit.

[Preparing a 2-week emergency food supply | UMN Extension](#): Resource on emergency meal planning with a two-week menu, shopping list, and recipes that is adaptable for nutrition program needs.

[Guidance for Industry: Voluntary Sodium Reduction Goals](#): FDA guidance document and tables with sodium reduction targets by food category.