



Considerations for Creating Menus

Initial Considerations

Before planning your menu:

- Know your target audience; conduct a survey of current and potential participants.
- Understand the demographic range you are targeting; look over the demographics of current participants on the enrollment forms. (Data on overall area demographics is normally available on your local public health department website.)
- Understand your local, seasonal food offerings.
- Consider the popular foods in your area and culturally appropriate meals.
- Establish a strong food chain supply. If your food supplier is less than reliable, it will be difficult to stick to your menus.

Compliance with Dietary Guidelines

The Older Americans Act requires that meals comply with the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) published by the US Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Secretary of Agriculture and the Dietary Reference Intake (DRIs). If the program provides:

- a) One meal per day: a minimum of $1/3$ of the DRI should be offered; Two meals per day: a minimum of $2/3$ of the DRI should be offered;
- b) Three meals per day: 100% of the DRI should be offered.

Nutrient Analysis vs. Meal Pattern Component Menu

There is more than one way to plan a menu. One way is to use nutrient analysis software. To use this method, your staff will require training and your program will need to maintain a license for the software. However, when registered dietitians or other nutrition site staff do not have access to nutrient analysis software or need flexibility when making substitutions, a meal pattern component menu may be used. One benefit to a meal pattern component menu is that you can take any recipe and make it align with the nutrition guidelines. Some states may require one method vs. another; always check with your State Unit on Aging before deciding on a method!

Cycle Menu Options and Considerations

A cycle menu is a template for a standard sequence of daily menus that can be used repeatedly. Cycle menus are helpful as the planning will help you save time, staff, and allow you to focus your efforts on providing other support services. Some benefits of creating cycle menus include:

- Making it easier to buy regularly used items in bulk.
- Taking advantage of seasonal foods; seasonal cycle menus are beneficial to add variety and to ensure seasonal foods are included.
- Reducing storage costs.
- Keeping stock at appropriate levels by helping project the right amount of product to purchase.

Cycle length and considerations depend on your situation. There is not a “one size fits all” answer. Cycle length can be dependent on storage space, participant desires for menu rotation, staffing, and goals for menu repetition frequency. Lengths can be unique, but some common ones are 4-5 weeks. Some benefits of using a cycle menu for longer stretches of time include:

- For a shorter cycle, allowing staff to learn the recipes quicker because they make them more often and quickly identifying whether participants like the menu as written.
- Allowing the opportunity to change out items as needed without rewriting the whole menu.
- Enabling you to evaluate staffing and food costs.
- Enabling you to track waste more easily.

Further Resources and Reading

- National Institutes of Health: [Nutrient Recommendations and Databases](#)
- Santa Clara County (San Jose, CA): [Congregate Policy and Procedure Manual](#)
(contains a local example of meal pattern component menu requirements)

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