



About Congregate Meals & Choice Menus

Currently, many congregate meal sites across the United States offer only a single option menu. However, if a participant does not like part of a meal or the whole meal itself, they are less likely to return to the meal site. By changing from a single option menu to a choice menu, it is possible to increase meal site participation and gain more satisfied participants.

According to the Administration for Community Living (ACL), there were about 1.6 million older adults participating in the congregate meal program each year from 2011 to 2018. There was a slight decline in participation between 2011 and 2014 (from 1.72 million to 1.56 million, approximately), but numbers remained stable from 2014 to 2018. From 2012 to 2018, the average annual retention rate for congregate meal site participants was 78 percent.

To increase participation rates, Senior Nutrition Providers (SNPs) have used various programs to increase the number of choices offered, types of meals offered, and the environment in which the meals are being offered. SNPs in Iowa and New Jersey are offering Cafés by partnering with local restaurants. The restaurant model allows participants to choose their meal, sides, and drinks. In Colorado, a SNP uses a restaurant program to provide a vegetarian, sandwich, and entrée salad option at every meal.

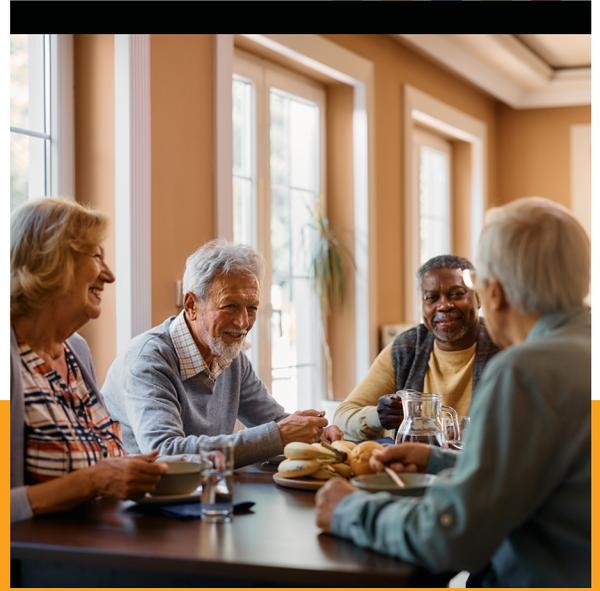
With an increase in popularity of different programs, more SNPs are interested in updating the number of choices offered at congregate meal sites to offer an experience more like restaurants and cafés. A choice menu allows each consumer to select a meal or part of a meal, such as the entrée, sides, and/or drinks. Choice menus are an effective strategy to improve congregate meal participation.

Sources:

1. Kahn-Lang A, Shenk M, and Mabli J. Program Entrance and Retention in the Older Americans Act Title III-C Nutrition Services Program.

https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/programs/2020-07/AoA_brief_entrance_retention.pdf

This project was supported in part by grant number 90PPNU0002 from the U.S. Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C. 20201. Grantees undertaking projects with government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their findings and conclusions. Points of view or opinions do not, therefore, necessarily represent official ACL policy.



Choice Menu Tip Sheet

Gain participant feedback about choice menus.

Use methods such as suggestion boxes, a survey handed out to participants, or by asking for in-person feedback. Possible questions may include:

- ▶ What type of meals?
 - Vegetarian, low carbohydrate or controlled carbohydrate, low sodium, culturally relevant meals, specific hot or cold meals, gluten-free options, etc.
 - ▶ What meal components would they like to choose daily?
 - ▶ What types of drinks should be offered?
 - Water, iced tea, milk, chocolate milk, coffee, etc.
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Develop menu items that fit the community.

Consider the culture, ethnicities, and languages represented at the congregate meal site. Ideas to develop appropriate meal items for the community include:

- ▶ Add culturally relevant meals.
 - ▶ Offer menus in different languages.
 - If there is a large Spanish speaking population at the meal site, develop a menu in Spanish. Invite Spanish speaking participants at the meal site to volunteer and help educate staff.
 - ▶ Identify any religious accommodations that may help increase participation.
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Start by increasing menu choices over a period of time.

Too many choices can increase food cost, labor cost, and stress for participants and staff/volunteers. Tips to introduce a choice menu include:

- ▶ Begin by offering two different entrées and serve with the same sides.
 - Make sure the entrées work well with the sides being offered.
 - Entrées could include a meat/meatless option or an opportunity to choose the protein (example: chicken, beef, etc.). Some programs start simple with “always available” options, such as a baked chicken breast or hamburger.
- ▶ Later, add an entrée salad, sandwich, and/or soup option.
 - If adding a daily entrée salad, sandwich, and/or soup option is not possible, try adding each on a weekly basis instead.
- ▶ See sample choice menus in Appendix A and Appendix B.

An ideal number of choices is between eight and 15, with two to five choices per menu category.

Develop a process for ordering, production, and delivery of choice menus.

Proper planning ensures a choice menu option works for staff and participants.

- ▶ Think about if choice meals will need to be ordered in advance and how far in advance.
 - ▶ Develop or identify production reports to track the number of choice meals.
 - ▶ Ensure processes allow enough time for sourcing all menu items
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Evaluate the new menu.

Look for ways to make programs better and able to grow with changing needs.

- ▶ Ask participants and staff what they think of the new choice menu:
 - What is working well?
 - What changes would they like to see?
 - ▶ Ask for participant feedback often.
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Choice Menu Pros and Cons

Pros

- Increase in participation of older adults
- Increase in participant satisfaction
- Improvement of perceived meal quality
- Greater variety of foods
- Includes various preferences
 - ◊ Helps reduce the gaps between different generational needs
 - ◊ Addresses cultural and religious preferences and needs
- Increase in voluntary contributions due to a higher perceived quality of food
- Decrease in stigmas about the program

Cons (and ways to overcome)

- Increase in food cost
 - ◊ Food cost can be offset with increased participant satisfaction. Monetary contribution amounts tend to increase when participants view the meal they receive as higher quality.
 - ◊ Use standardized recipes to prepare meals for the number of participants expected each day.
- Increase in labor cost
 - ◊ Encourage volunteers to assist in daily meal activities.
 - ◊ Plan production tasks to maximize labor.
- Increase in stress from too many choices
 - ◊ Survey the participants at your meal site to ask what choices they would like to have in terms of the meals being offered.
 - ◊ Ask if they want to choose between a meat or vegetarian entrée option. Ask if they want to choose from a variety of sides.
 - ◊ Use symbols to promote a “special” for the day to reduce choice anxiety and steer selections.
- Increase in menu development difficulty
 - ◊ Use a cyclic menu to reduce the number of individual meal ideas.
 - ◊ Create a consistent meal schedule.



For more information and guidance on menu planning for senior nutrition programs see the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans and Older Adults: Toolkit for Senior Nutrition Programs](#)

Appendix A: A Simple Choice Menu

Menu

CHOOSE
ONE

ENTREE

Cheese Pizza

Beef Stroganoff

VEGETABLE

Steamed Broccoli

FRUIT

Fruit Cocktail

DESSERT

Sugar Cookie

BEVERAGE

Milk

Chocolate Milk

Water

Appendix B: A Complex Choice Menu

Menu

SELECT ONE
CHOICE
FROM
EACH
GROUP

ENTREE

Cheese Pizza

Beef Stroganoff

Chef Salad

Soup of the Week

Deli Sandwich (Ham & Cheese or
Turkey & Cheddar)

VEGETABLE

Steamed Broccoli

Green Beans

FRUIT

Fruit Cocktail

Peaches

DESSERT

Sugar Cookie

BEVERAGE

Milk

Chocolate Milk

Iced Tea

Coffee

Water