

Menu Creation Toolkit

This document provides a generalized menu pattern with portion size options and sample menu builds. The menu pattern's goal is to provide a basic guide for creating a nutritionally adequate meal, aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) and the Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs).

DGAs provide the following daily serving targets as context for senior nutrition program meal planning. Senior nutrition program meals must provide a minimum of one-third of these daily goals per meal:

- Protein: Prioritize high-quality, unprocessed sources at every meal
- Dairy: 3 servings per day (no added sugars preferred)
- Vegetables: 3 servings per day (variety of colors and types)
- Fruit: 2 servings per day (whole fruit preferred over juice)
- Whole Grains: 2-4 servings per day (minimally processed; high fiber options)
- Added Sugars: 10 grams or less per meal

An average meal will include a minimum of:

- Protein: 3 or more ounces
- Grain: ½ cup or 1 ounce (whole grain preferred)
- Dairy: 1 cup (no added sugars preferred)
- Fruit: ½ - ¾ cup
- Vegetable: ½ - 1 cup

Menu Pattern & Portion Size Equivalents

Protein

The recommended protein serving size per meal is a minimum of 3 ounces.

Each of the following is equivalent to 1 ounce of protein: 1 egg, ½ cup (4 ounces) of legumes such as beans and lentils, 1 ounce of cooked meat, fish, or poultry, 1 ounce of cheese, 2 tablespoons of peanut butter, ⅓ cup of nuts, ¼ cup of cottage cheese, or 1 ounce of tofu.

Grains

The recommended serving size per meal is 1-2 ounces. Serving size options:

1 slice (1 ounce) of bread, 4 ounces of a starchy vegetable, ½ cup of cooked pasta, rice, or noodles, 1 ounce of ready-to-eat cereal, a 2-inch cube of cornbread, 1 slice of French toast, ½ of an English muffin, 4-6 crackers (1 ounce), 1 tortilla or biscuit, ½ of a bagel (3-4 inches in diameter), 1 small

sandwich bun, ½ cup of cooked cereal such as oatmeal, ½ of a large hot dog or hamburger bun (1 ounce), or ½ cup of bread dressing or stuffing.

Milk and Alternatives

The recommended serving size per meal is a minimum of 1 cup. Serving size options:

8 ounces of milk (whole milk, 1%, 2%, or skim), 8 ounces of a milk alternative such as lactose-free, soy, rice, almond, or oat milk (unsweetened), 1½ ounces of natural cheese, ½ cup of calcium-processed tofu, powdered calcium-fortified beverage mix prepared with water, 4–6 ounces of calcium-fortified juice (monitor added sugars), 1 cup of yogurt (plain, unsweetened yogurt is preferred), or ¼ cup of nonfat powdered dry milk mixed with 1 cup of water.

Fruits and Vegetables

The recommended serving size per meal is at least 1 serving of fruit and at least 1 serving of vegetables.

Fruit serving size options include ½ cup of fresh, frozen, canned, or cooked fruit with no added sugars, such as apples, pears, or bananas; ½ cup of 100% fruit juice (limited), ¼ cup of dried fruit, or 15 grapes.

Vegetable serving size options include ½ cup of cooked, drained, fresh, frozen, canned, or raw vegetables, such as green beans or peas. 1 cup of raw leafy greens with a variety of vegetable greens, ½ cup of tomato juice, or ½ cup of 100% vegetable juice.

Oils and Fats

The recommended serving size per meal varies. Serving size options:

Preferred oil and fat options include olive oil, butter, or beef tallow, while monitoring total saturated fat intake. Another serving option is 1 tablespoon of mayonnaise.

Sample Meal Builds: Meeting the Minimums

These examples show how to combine portion equivalents from the table above to meet the minimum requirements for one Senior Nutrition Program Meal. These are just examples; work with a registered dietitian or someone of equal education level to create your menus.

Meal	Protein (min. 3 oz)	Grain (min. ½-1 serving)	Milk/Milk Alt (min. 1 cup)	Fruit and Vegetable (min. 1 serving each)	Oils/Fats
Meal A	3 oz. grilled chicken	½ cup brown rice	8 oz milk	½ cup green beans + ½ cup pineapple	1 tbsp olive oil (in cooking)
Meal B	½ cup beans + 1 oz cheese	1 slice whole wheat bread	1 cup unsweetened soy milk	½ cup steamed broccoli + ½ cup mixed berries	-
Meal C	1 egg + 2 tbsp peanut butter	½ English muffin	¼ cup nonfat powdered milk (reconstituted)	½ cup cooked carrots + ¼ cup dried fruit	1 tbsp mayonnaise
Meal D	1 oz tofu + 1/3 cup nuts	½ cup cooked quinoa or rice	½ cup calcium-set tofu	1 cup raw leafy greens + ½ cup fruit juice	Olive oil (in dressing)

Note: Protein can be met with a single source (e.g., 3 oz chicken) or combined with smaller portions (e.g., beans, cheese, egg, and peanut butter) if the combined portions reach the 3 oz-equivalent minimum.

Meal Creations

Protein

Protein options include an omelet with broccoli and cheese, pinto bean tacos, an egg salad sandwich, grilled chicken with peach salsa, spiced salmon, lemon pepper fish, tuna a la king, beef and cabbage casserole, ham with pineapple sauce, meatloaf with low-sodium gravy, vegetarian chili, pork loin with mushroom gravy, shrimp scampi, baked cod with herbs, stuffed bell pepper, chicken and cheese enchilada, seasoned tofu, beef stew, baked ziti, beef noodle stroganoff, chicken Caesar salad, and a peanut butter sandwich on whole-grain bread.

Grains

Grain options include whole wheat bread, whole wheat dinner rolls, brown rice, wild rice, parsley mashed potatoes, Spanish rice, sweet potatoes or sweet potato mash, whole grain cornbread, red skin potatoes, baked potatoes, whole grain breadsticks, whole grain pasta, and whole grain hamburger or hot dog buns.

Milk and Alternatives

Milk and milk alternative options include whole, 1%, 2%, or skim milk; unsweetened soy, rice, almond, oat, or lactose-free milk; fortified grapefruit juice (monitor added sugars); calcium-fortified juice; or a powdered calcium-fortified beverage mix prepared with water.

Fruit and Vegetables

Fruit and vegetable options include California vegetables, green pepper coleslaw, three bean salad, Brussels sprouts, seasoned green beans, seasoned broccoli, zucchini and summer squash, sweet potatoes, seasoned kale, split pea soup, lentil soup, vegetable barley soup, corn chowder, savory cabbage, red cabbage slaw, cinnamon yams, stir-fry vegetables, cauliflower florets, roasted sweet potato and root vegetables, tomato sauce, mushroom sauce, peas and carrots, spiced apricots, pineapple, banana orange salad, mixed berries, fresh fruit salad, mandarin oranges, yogurt with fresh fruit, melon medley, nectarines, fresh strawberries, grapes, fresh apples, bananas, apple crisp, cinnamon applesauce, and hot cinnamon apples.

Optional Dessert

Optional dessert options include low-sugar pudding, rice pudding, sugar-free cookies, fresh fruit cups, cinnamon-baked apples, reduced-sugar peach cobbler, one reduced-sugar oatmeal cookie, date bars, fruit crisps such as apple or berry, and plain yogurt with fresh fruit.

Program Menu Highlights

Listed below are menu highlights from state senior nutrition program sites, along with links to their full monthly menus.

Bristol Elder Services, Massachusetts

[Bristol Elder Services Program Menu](#)

Examples

- Grilled chicken, peach salsa, parsley mashed potatoes, brussels sprouts, whole wheat bread, and mixed berries.
- Shrimp with pesto cream, mashed potatoes, riviera vegetable, whole wheat bread, and mixed fruit.
- Chicken stew with vegetables, white or brown rice, biscuit, and mandarin oranges.
- Turkey stir-fry, lo-mein noodles, whole wheat roll, and pineapple.

El Dorado County, California

[El Dorado County Program Menu](#)

Examples

- Sesame chicken, fried wild rice, stir-fried vegetables, mandarin oranges, fortune cookie, and milk.

- Southwestern stuffed bell pepper, garden salad, potato roll, apple crisp, and milk.
- Beef stew with roasted sweet potatoes and root vegetables, cornbread, pineapple, and milk.
- Pork tamale verde, refried beans and cheese, Spanish rice, orange, and milk.

Habersham County, Georgia

[Habersham County Program Menu](#)

Examples

- Macaroni and cheese, black-eyed peas, collard greens, cornbread, fresh fruit, and milk.
- Fajita chicken, fiesta rice, pinto beans, lettuce/ tomato, flour tortilla, fresh fruit, and milk.
- Sausage patty, cheese grits, hot spiced apples, grape juice, and biscuit.
- Beef and bow tie casserole, country corn, green beans, wheat bread, vanilla wafers, and milk.

Johnson County, Kansas

[Johnson County Program Menu](#)

Examples

- Smoked Polish sausage, Delmonico potatoes, glazed carrots, multigrain bread, strawberry swirl pudding, or diet vanilla pudding.
- Tuna salad, lemon orzo pasta salad, beet salad, club crackers, and fresh fruit.
- Loaded potato casserole, whole kernel corn, stewed tomatoes, wheat bread, and pineapple tidbits.
- Eggplant parmesan, rotini pasta, Italian green beans, breadsticks, and raisins.

Resources

- [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#)
- [Healthy Eating as You Age: Know Your Food Groups](#) (NIA)
- [Food Shopping and Meal Planning Resources](#) (USDA)