



School Food and Beverage Standards

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Prepared by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in collaboration with the Department of Health and Wellness and Nova Scotia Health, Public Health

School Food and Beverage Standards

Purpose

The purpose of these standards is to support school staff/volunteers and school food providers to determine which foods and beverages may be offered¹ at school, including as part of school, team/group, classroom activities, school-wide events, and fundraising efforts. This document outlines a step-by-step process that is to be used to select foods and beverages, regardless of whether food is cooked or baked from scratch or served as a pre-packaged mixed dish. The *Standards* support schools to model the best possible food environments to support student learning and healthy development.

The School Food and Nutrition Policy and these standards DO NOT apply to foods and beverages brought from home for individual consumption.

Definitions

“Highly processed foods” means processed or prepared foods and drinks that add excess sodium, sugars, or saturated fat to the diet.

“Natural health products” include vitamins, minerals, herbal remedies, homeopathic medicines, and traditional medicines.

“Plant-based proteins” are proteins found only in plants, not from fish or animals. Examples include beans, lentils, nuts, peas, seeds, and tofu and other soy-based products.

“Refined grains” have some parts of the grain removed during processing and have less fibre and nutrients than whole grains.

“Saturated fat” is a type of fat mainly found in or made from animal-based foods and is typically solid at room temperature. It also includes some tropical oils, like palm and coconut.

“Sugar substitutes” are food additives regulated by Health Canada that are sometimes referred to as “sweeteners.” Examples include aspartame, erythritol, isomalt, lactitol, maltitol and maltitol syrup, mannitol, saccharin, sorbitol and sorbitol syrup, stevia extract and steviol glycosides, and xylitol.

“Unsaturated fat” is a type of fat mainly found in or made from plant-based foods and is typically liquid at room temperature.

“Whole grain foods” include all parts of the grain and have more fibre and nutrients than refined grains.

¹ For this document, the term “offered” refers to all foods and beverages sold, served, and made available in schools.

Background



Figure 1: Canada's Food Guide Plate

"Canada's Food Guide" (Government of Canada)

<https://food-guide.canada.ca/en>



Canada's Food Guide (CFG) is an evidence-based set of recommendations to support healthy eating and the nutritional well-being of Canadians. It is intended to model a healthy eating pattern for Canadians 2 years of age and older and contains eating guidelines and considerations that are relevant and applicable for the Canadian context.

Canada's Food Guide Plate (Figure 1) demonstrates nutritious foods that are the foundation of a **healthy eating pattern**² and can be used as a tool to plan healthy meals and snacks. The plate recommends 3 categories of food to be consumed regularly: **vegetables and fruits, whole grains, and protein foods** with an emphasis on **plant-based proteins**. These foods provide nutrients that are important for healthy child development including fibre, unsaturated fats, vitamins (e.g., vitamin D), and minerals (e.g., calcium). Evidence shows that an eating pattern based on these foods can promote better health outcomes throughout the lifespan.

Canada's Food Guide Plate is a reference tool for planning the proportions of food groups at each meal and snack, whether served on a plate, in a bowl, in shared servings dishes, or buffet-style. **Vegetables and fruits** should make up the largest food group offered/available, and should be at least half of the meal or snack, while **whole grain foods** and **proteins foods** should each be approximately a quarter of each meal or snack. Section 1 of these standards provides guidance for planning snacks and meals served in schools.

Sections 2 through 5 of these standards provide detailed lists of foods and beverages that can and cannot be offered at school. Foods in the **"offer"** lists align with CFG and provide essential nutrients to support student learning and growth. Serving foods from the **"offer"** lists creates a food environment in schools that makes it easier for students to eat healthy and develop a positive relationship with food. Foods and beverages on the **"not to offer"** lists are **highly processed foods** and are not included in Canada's Food Guide Plate because they often contribute excess sodium, sugars, and/or saturated fat to eating patterns and should not be consumed regularly. These foods can also take the place of healthier foods and as a result may not give children the nourishment they need to grow and learn. Research shows that when children are regularly exposed to and consume highly processed foods, they may prefer them over healthier foods. To support school staff/volunteers and food providers, there is a list of suggested alternatives for foods and beverages on the **"not to offer"** lists. For foods that do not appear in the two lists, the **% Daily Value (% DV)** tool is used in these standards to select packaged foods that contain less sodium, sugars, and saturated fat. See Appendix B for information about reading the Nutrition Facts table and determining if a food or beverage meets the % DV criteria.

² An "eating pattern" refers to what we eat and drink on a regular basis.

³ Artificial trans fats (noted in the table on page 3) have been banned from the food supply in Canada, however these fats are still naturally occurring in some foods. In Nutrition Facts tables you may still see saturated fats grouped with trans fats when looking for % DV.

While CFG describes nutritious foods as the foundation for healthy eating, healthy eating is more than the foods offered. Other components of the food and mealtime environment are essential to encourage children to develop healthy relationships with food. Creating an inclusive school food environment requires variety, flexibility and the promotion of food choices that suit different needs, dietary requirements, and cultural food traditions. When striving to create an inclusive school food environment, it is important to first explore and understand the cultural practices and traditional foods of the population that a school serves.

Section 1: Meals and Snacks

Meals and snacks served in schools should combine a vegetable or fruit option(s) with a whole grain and/or a protein food. CFG recommends that vegetables and/or fruits make up half of each meal and snack.

Planning meals and snacks served in schools involves the following steps:

- **Step 1:** Consult the Food Lists below to determine which foods can be offered (and see examples provided).
- **Step 2:** For foods not included in the Food Lists, using the % Daily Value criteria for that food category, consult the food label to determine if it can be served. (See Appendix B)

Section 2: Vegetables and Fruits



Figure 2: Canada's Food Guide Plate (Vegetables and Fruit)

Vegetables and fruit are an important part of a healthy eating pattern. These foods have important nutrients for growing children including fibre, vitamins, and minerals. Canada's Food Guide recommends offering vegetables or fruit at every meal and snack and incorporating a variety of vegetables and fruits with different textures, colours, and shapes.

Step 1: Check the Food Lists

Vegetables and Fruits to Offer Foods/beverages consistent with CFG that can be sold or served at school	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● fresh vegetables and fruits ● frozen vegetables and fruits ● canned fruit (packed in juice) ● canned vegetables ● dried fruit (100% fruit with no added sugar; to be served with meals only) ● fruit sauces (100% fruit with no added sugar, e.g., unsweetened apple sauce) 	
<p>Examples of foods that may be offered</p> <p>Food/beverages that may be sold/served provided they fit the % Daily Value nutrient criteria</p>	<p>Foods that do not align with CFG</p> <p>Foods/beverages not consistent with CFG* which should not be regularly sold or served at school (exceptions may be made where part of traditional/ cultural food offering or for school-wide events at the administrator's approval)</p> <p><i>*higher in sodium, sugars and/or saturated fat, low in fibre, and/or have minimal added nutritional value</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● fruit cups (canned or plastic cups, packed in juice) ● fruit salad cups (fresh or frozen fruits) ● fruit kebabs prepared fresh (grapes, cut melon or pineapple, berries, etc.) ● smoothies (homemade with fruit, milk, yogurt) ● vegetable cups with dip (e.g. ranch dressing) ● non-par-fried, pre-cut potatoes that are baked or roasted ● roasted sweet potato wedges (served with curry dip) ● added diced fresh or frozen vegetables to main meals like stir-fry, spaghetti sauce, omelets, taco filling, casseroles, or soups ● rainbow fruit platter (sliced fruits with a yogurt dip or nut butter) ● adding frozen or mashed fruit to baking, such as banana, applesauce, pureed pumpkin, squash and/or sweet potato ● dried fruit added to homemade baked foods or as a topping or flavour enhancer (such as offered in a salad bar) ● salad bars 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● battered and/or deep-fried vegetables ● canned fruit in syrup ● canned fruit packed in water with sugar substitutes ● chips (regular or baked), including potato chips, corn chips, tortilla chips, veggie chips ● dried vegetables or fruit with added sugar and/or sugar substitutes ● frozen fruit bars, popsicles, fruit-based freezies ● fruit cups in gelatin/jelly ● par-fried French fries ● prepared pie filling ● processed fruit snacks (e.g., fruit leathers, fruit bars and gummies, including those made with 100% fruit juice) ● products that are deep-fried or contain sugar substitutes, caffeine, or natural health products

Step 2: For processed vegetables and fruits that are not listed above, look at the Nutrition Facts table on the product label and **use the % Daily Value** criteria below to determine if a food may be offered. If it meets all three criteria, then it may be offered. If it exceeds one or more criteria, then it may not.

Saturated and Trans Fat ³	Sugars	Sodium
Less than 15%	Less than 15%	Less than 15%

Section 3: Whole Grain Foods



Figure 3: Canada's Food Guide Plate (Whole Grain Foods)

Whole grain foods are a key source of nutrients and energy. **Whole grains** are a healthier choice than **refined grains** because they contain all parts of the grain and have more fibre, vitamins, and minerals. Including foods higher in fibre regularly as part of a healthy eating pattern can help to lower risk of chronic diseases later in life.

Step 1: Check the Food Lists

Whole Grains to Offer^{4,5}

Foods/beverages consistent with CFG that can be sold or served at school

- whole grain bread products such as bagels, bannock, bread, buns, flatbread, naan, pitas, pizza crust, tortilla wraps
- brown rice or wild rice, plain
- whole grain noodles/pasta, plain
- whole grains such as amaranth, barley (except pearled), buckwheat, bulgur, millet, quinoa, rye, whole oats or oatmeal (unsweetened)
- air-popped, unflavoured popcorn

Use ingredient lists to identify whole grain foods.

- Some foods may look like they are whole grain because of their colour or labelling (e.g., multigrain), but they may not be.
- Read the ingredient list and choose foods that have the words “whole grain” followed by the name of the grain as the first ingredient like “whole grain oats” and “whole grain wheat.”
- When a whole grain option is unavailable, choose whole wheat foods over refined “white” grains when possible.

⁴ While schools settings are encouraged to offer whole grain foods as much as possible, it is recognized that refined grains or flours (e.g., white rice, white flour) are important ingredients in some cultural dishes. The administrator or designate can incorporate these foods at their discretion to support inclusion and representation of culturally appropriate foods for students.

⁵ Please refer to Step 2 to determine which crackers may be offered.

<p>Examples of foods that may be offered</p> <p>Food/beverages that may be sold/served provided they fit the % Daily Value nutrient criteria</p>	<p>Foods that do not align with CFG</p> <p>Foods/beverages not consistent with CFG* which should not be regularly sold or served at school (exceptions may be made where part of traditional/cultural food offering or for school-wide events at the administrator's approval)</p> <p><i>*higher in sodium, sugars and/or saturated fat, low in fibre, and/or have minimal added nutritional value</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● brown rice or quinoa (as a side dish, mixed dish such as stir fry, or part of a grain bowl with grilled veggies and chicken) ● whole grain macaroni and cheese ● granola bars (not yogurt or chocolate dipped) ● whole grain cereals ● whole grain muffins or loaves (homemade) ● whole grain English muffins or bagels ● whole grain crackers ● popped corn ● whole grain breads for sandwiches ● whole grain tortillas for wraps (like a chicken Caesar salad wrap or banana and nut butter), quesadillas or soft taco ● baked whole grain tortillas (serve with a tomato or fruit salsa) ● a pizza dough made with half whole wheat or whole grain flour pizza dough. ● white rice as part of an authentic cultural dish/recipe ● whole grain, whole wheat, or fortified pastas included as part of: Spaghetti and a lean meat or lentil tomato sauce ● macaroni and cheese (with a pumpkin or sweet potato puree) ● spiral noodle pasta salad (vinaigrette dressing, diced vegetables) ● fruit muffins made in house (not store bought or made from a pre-mix) with half whole grain or whole wheat flour ● energy bites (made in house with whole oats, nut butter, dried fruit, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● store-bought or made in-house from a mix: cookies, bars (e.g., brownies), ● loaves (e.g., zucchini/banana bread), muffins, pancakes, waffles ● made from scratch or pre-packaged: cakes (including cupcakes and cake pops), croissants, donuts/sweet buns (e.g., cinnamon buns), graham crackers, pastries (including toaster pastries), pies/tarts, puffed rice cereal bars (See Section 6: Cooking and Baking from Scratch.) ● regular or baked: cheesies, crisps, pretzels, puffs, straws, twists ● cereals (hot or cold) that are not whole grain ● cereals (hot or cold), even if whole grain, with candies, chocolate, or marshmallows ● energy bars, protein bars ● granola bars with chocolate chips or marshmallows, coated granola bars (e.g., covered in chocolate or “yogurt”) ● hard taco shells ● canned or pre-seasoned pasta/noodles or rice ● products that are deep-fried or contain sugar substitutes, caffeine, or natural health products

Step 2: For grain foods that are not listed above, look at the Nutrition Facts table on the product label and use the % Daily Value (% DV) criteria below to determine if a food may be offered. If it meets all four criteria, then it may be offered. If it does not meet one or more criteria, then it may not.

Saturated and Trans Fat	Sugars	Sodium	Fibre
Less than 15%	Less than 15%	Less than 15%	More than 5%

For example, the following table compares a brand of whole grain cracker, a whole grain cereal, and a whole wheat dinner roll with the % DV criteria listed above.

	Saturated and Trans Fat	Sugars	Sodium	Fibre
	Less than 15%	Less than 15%	Less than 15%	More than 5%
Whole Grain Cracker <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6%	8%	9%	11%
Whole Grain Cereal	2%	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 16%	6%	11%
Whole Wheat Dinner Roll (not whole grain) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3%	4%	13%	11%

The whole grain cracker and whole wheat dinner roll can be offered because these products meet all four criteria outlined above, but this brand of whole grain cereal cannot be offered because it does not meet the criteria for sugars.

Section 4: Protein Foods

Eating a variety of protein foods is an important part of a healthy eating pattern. Choosing plant-based protein foods more often is also important because they have more fibre and less saturated fat than other types of protein food.

Step 1: Check the Food Lists



Figure 4: Canada's Food Guide Plate (Protein Foods)

Protein Foods to Offer Foods/beverages consistent with CFG that can be sold or served at school	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● chicken and turkey (fresh/frozen) ● extra lean or lean ground meat ● lean beef and pork (fresh/frozen) ● cottage cheese ● eggs ● canned fish ● fish and shellfish (fresh/frozen) ● fresh/canned/dried legumes (beans, peas, lentils) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● hard cheese ● hummus plain (unsweetened and unsalted) ● nuts, seeds, nut butters, and seed butters (dependent on food allergy policy) ● plain (unsweetened) fortified soy beverage ● plain (unsweetened) milk (0-2% MF) ● plain (unsweetened) yogurt (0-2% MF) ● tofu, tempeh ● wild game
<p>Examples of foods that may be offered</p> <p>Food/beverages that may be sold/served provided they fit the % Daily Value nutrient criteria</p>	<p>Foods that do not align with CFG</p> <p>Foods/beverages not consistent with CFG* which should not be regularly sold or served at school (exceptions may be made where part of traditional/cultural food offering or for school-wide events at the administrator's approval)</p> <p><i>*higher in sodium, sugars and/or saturated fat, low in fibre, and/or have minimal added nutritional value</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● hamburger with lean ground beef (and whole wheat bun) ● homemade chicken tenders (whole wheat breadcrumbs, baked, unprocessed chicken breast) ● yogurt (alone or pair with fruit and whole grain cereal to make a parfait) ● yogurt tubes (can also freeze these if have a freezer) ● yogurt drinks ● cheese sticks or strings ● milk: unsweetened cow's milk or unsweetened fortified plant-based beverages (such as almond, oat, soy), served on own or added to smoothies, whole grain cereals ● burgers (made in house with lean ground beef, black beans, and/or ground chicken on a whole wheat bun) ● lean ground beef or chicken meatballs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● bacon and turkey bacon ● beef jerky, dried sausage, and pepperoni snacks ● canned meats ● commercially battered and/or breaded chicken, fish, turkey, or other meats (e.g., chicken nuggets/strips, fish sticks) ● corned beef ● deli meats (e.g., bologna, chicken, ham, pepperoni, roast beef, salami, turkey) ● foods/beverages made with protein powder ● hot dogs/wieners ● ice cream, sherbert, frozen yogurt, frozen desserts ● processed cheese (spread, slices, and sauce) ● protein bars ● protein shakes/milkshakes (homemade or pre-packaged) ● pudding ● sausages, sausage rounds, and pork breakfast links ● products that are deep-fried or contain sugar substitutes, caffeine, or natural health products

Step 2: For protein foods that are not listed above, look at the Nutrition Facts table on the product label and use the % Daily Value (% DV) criteria below to determine if a food may be offered. If it meets all three criteria, then it may be offered. If it exceeds one or more criteria, then it may not.

Saturated and Trans Fat	Sugars	Sodium
Less than 15%	Less than 15%	Less than 15%

For example, the following table compares two brands of sweetened yogurt.

	Saturated and Trans Fat	Sugars	Sodium
	Less than 15%	Less than 15%	Less than 15%
Yogurt #1	0%	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 15%	2%
Yogurt #2 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	0%	12%	2%

Yogurt #2 can be offered because it meets all three % DV criteria outlined above, but Yogurt #1 cannot because it does not meet the criteria for sugars

Section 5: Beverages

Including healthy drink choices as part of the regular eating pattern is just as important as food choices. Some beverage choices have a lot of sodium, sugar, and saturated fat. For this reason, Canada's Food Guide recommends making water the drink of choice to promote hydration.

Step 1: Check the Beverage Lists

Beverages to Offer	
Beverages consistent with CFG that can be sold or served at school	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • water • unsweetened carbonated or still water • plain (unsweetened) milk (0-2% mf) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plain (unsweetened) kefir • plain (unsweetened) plant-based beverages
Examples of beverages that may be offered	Beverages that do not align with CFG
<p>Beverages that may be sold/served provided they fit the % Daily Value nutrient criteria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • water with added fruit or herbs (such as berries and mint, or orange slices) • unsweetened cow's milk or unsweetened fortified plant-based beverages (such as almond, oat, soy), served on own or added to smoothies 	<p>Beverages not consistent with CFG* which should not be regularly sold or served at school (exceptions may be made where part of traditional/cultural food offering or for school-wide events at the administrator's approval)</p> <p><i>*higher in sodium, sugars and/or saturated fat, low in fibre, and/or have minimal added nutritional value</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% fruit juice, fruit-flavoured drinks (e.g., lemonade), cocktails, punch • coffee and tea (including caffeinated and decaffeinated, herbal tea, iced tea, and cold coffee beverages) • energy drinks • flavoured waters with added sugars • hot chocolate • liquid or crystal water enhancers • protein shakes/milkshakes, including meal replacements and beverages made with protein powder • slushy drinks • soft drinks • sport/electrolyte replacement drinks • sweetened milk (including chocolate milk) • sweetened plant-based beverages • vitamin water • beverages containing sugar substitutes, added caffeine, or natural health products

Step 2: For beverages that are not listed above, look at the Nutrition Facts table on the product label and use the % Daily Value (% DV) criteria below to determine if a beverage may be offered. If it meets all three criteria, then it may be offered. If it exceeds one or more criteria, then it may not.

Saturated and Trans Fat	Sugars	Sodium
Less than 15%	Less than 15%	Less than 15%

Section 6: Pre-packaged Mixed Dishes

Mixed dishes include foods that are pre-packaged, prepared frozen, or made by a restaurant/caterer and include foods from more than one food grouping (vegetables and fruits, whole grain foods, and protein foods), e.g., casseroles, stews, lasagna. While pre-packaged mixed foods are convenient, they are often highly processed and high in saturated fat, sodium, and/or sugar, or may contain sugar substitutes. It is preferable to make foods from scratch when possible.

Use the % Daily Value (% DV) to identify which pre-packaged mixed foods may be offered. If the pre-packaged mixed food does not fit the % DV criteria below, it should not be offered.

How Product is Offered	Saturated and Trans Fat	Sugars	Sodium
As an entrée/ main meal	Less than 30%	Less than 30%	Less than 30%
As a side dish or snack	Less than 15%	Less than 15%	Less than 15%

Section 7: Cooking and Baking from Scratch

Cooking and baking from scratch is encouraged where feasible to support a healthy food environment. Cooking foods from scratch has several advantages such as relying less on highly processed foods, controlling the amount of sauces and seasonings, reducing food costs, and incorporating healthy ingredients.

The following criteria outline the requirements for selecting recipes when cooking and baking from scratch:

- If a recipe is made with ingredients from the “to offer” list, it may be offered in schools.
- Ingredients listed as “cannot be offered” may NOT be used when cooking or baking.

Healthy Fats and Oils

Choosing food with healthy fat is another important consideration for healthy eating patterns. The type of fat eaten over time is more important than the total amount of fat consumed.

Use the following healthy fats/oils in cooking and baking as much as possible:

- avocado
- canola
- flaxseed
- olive
- peanut
- sesame
- soft margarine
- sunflower

Where possible, **replace saturated fat** used in food preparation with unsaturated fats (see list above). Offer foods prepared with saturated fats infrequently and limit the amount used.

Examples of saturated fats to limit include:

- butter
- coconut oil
- ghee
- palm oil

Other

- **Sugar** (including honey and maple syrup) may be used in small amounts as an ingredient in recipes.
- **Flours, buttermilk, spices, leavening agents** (baking soda and baking powder) are not listed in sections 1 through 5 because they are not typically consumed on their own, but they may be included as ingredients in recipes.
- Prepare muffins, loaves, pancakes, and waffles from scratch with **at least half whole grain or whole wheat flour**.

Section 8: Condiments

Condiments should be used in small amounts (**approx. 1 tbsp**) to accompany meals and snacks and enhance flavours. Examples include:

- blue cheese
- breadcrumbs
- brie
- chutney
- cream cheese
- croutons
- feta
- jam
- ketchup
- parmesan cheese
- pickles
- salsa
- sour cream
- unsweetened cocoa powder

Where possible, offer **lower sodium** (e.g., soy sauce) and **lower saturated fat** (e.g., sour cream) varieties.

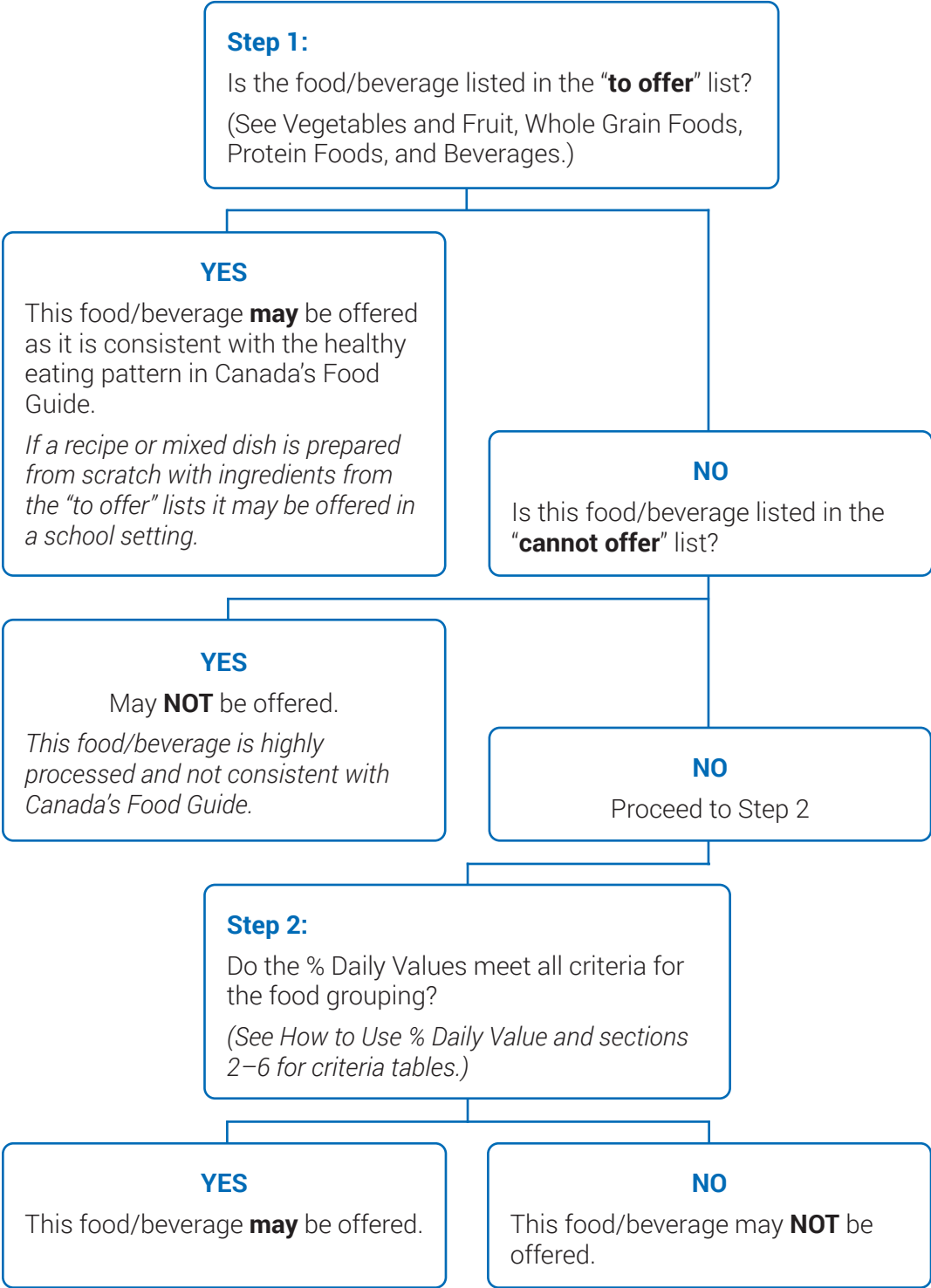
Section 9: Other Foods Not to Be Offered

The following foods should not be offered in schools because they are highly processed.

- candy
- chocolate (including chocolate chips)
- cough drops, mints
- fudge
- gum
- marshmallows
- popsicles, freezies
- sweetened gelatin, jellied desserts
- whipped cream, whipped dessert topping

Appendix A: How to Determine if a Food or Beverage May Be Offered

The following decision tree provides an overview of the steps described in sections 1–5 to determine if a food and/or beverage may be offered in the school setting.



Appendix B: How to Use % Daily Value

If a food/beverage is not listed in the “to offer” and “cannot offer” lists (Step 1), Step 2 requires reading the Nutrition Facts table on the product label to determine if the food or beverage meets the % Daily Value (% DV) criteria. The % DV is found on the right-hand side of the Nutrition Facts table (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Sample Nutrition Facts Table

NEW	
Nutrition Facts Valeur nutritive	
Per 1 cup (250 mL) pour 1 tasse (250 mL)	
Calories 110	
Fat/Lipides 0 g	0%
Saturated/saturés 0 g + Trans / trans 0 g	0%
Carbohydrate/Glucides 26 g	
Fibre/Fibres 0 g	0%
Sugars / Sucrés 22 g	22%
Protein/Protéines 2 g	
Cholesterol/Cholestérol 0 mg	
Sodium 0 mg	0%
Potassium 450 mg	10%
Calcium 30 mg	2%
Iron/Fer 0 mg	0%

In these standards, % DV is used to select products that are lower in:

- saturated fat
- sodium
- sugars

For grain foods, % DV is also used to select products that are higher in:

- fibre

See sections 1 through 5 for the criteria applicable to each food grouping, beverages, and mixed dishes. A product needs to meet **all criteria** for it to be offered in schools.

For more information on % DV, see “[Nutrition Labelling](#)” from the Health Canada website.