

## **Law puts more vegetables, fruits on school kids' plates**

**WASHINGTON** — U.S. schoolchildren, accustomed to a steady diet of pizza and french fries, will find more fruits, vegetables and whole grains on their trays under new government rules announced Wednesday.

The new Department of Agriculture rules aim to boost the nutritional quality of the federally funded meals consumed by roughly 32 million schoolchildren.

The rules represent the first major revision of school meal standards in more than 15 years and are intended to combat the nation's childhood obesity crisis — nearly 1 in 3 children in America are overweight or obese.

The revamp comes just months after lawmakers protected pizza's status as a vegetable and killed proposed limits on weekly servings of starchy vegetables like potatoes.

In addition to doubling produce servings, the new guidelines call for serving only fat-free and low-fat milk, child-appropriate portion sizes and reductions in sodium, saturated fat and trans fat.

They fall under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which was championed by first lady Michelle Obama. President Barack Obama approved the measure in late 2010.

The new standards will be largely phased in over time, starting in the 2012-13 school year. They are estimated to cost roughly \$3.2 billion to implement over the next five years.

The act provides more funding to schools to help cover the extra costs associated with the menu changes.

Lawmakers altered the school lunch guidelines in November, when they barred the USDA from limiting the weekly servings of french fries and ensured that pizza counted as a vegetable portion because of its tomato paste.

Trade associations representing frozen pizza sellers as well as french fry sellers helped block changes to rules affecting those items.

Critics have said the government should not meddle in the food decisions made by families.

"What we are announcing today are science-based rules and regulations that are going to substantially improve the meal qualities across the United States for children," the USDA's Kevin Concannon said on a conference call.

Margo Wootan, nutrition policy director for the nonprofit Center For Science in the Public Interest, said the new standards were a big improvement despite food industry lobbying and the congressional revamp.

"The new school meal standards are one of the most important advances in nutrition in decades," she said in a statement.

The Environmental Working Group said the adjustments may help reduce medical bills related to diabetes and other obesity-related chronic diseases.

"A healthier population will save billions of dollars in future health care costs," said Dawn Undurruga, the organization's staff nutritionist.

As part of the new standards, the USDA will increase the number of inspections of school menus.

As an example of a new meal, the Department of Agriculture said an elementary school lunch could be whole wheat spaghetti with meat sauce and a whole wheat roll, green beans, broccoli, cauliflower, kiwi, low-fat milk, low-fat ranch dip and soft margarine.

That lunch would replace a meal of a hot dog on a bun with ketchup, canned pears, raw celery and carrots with ranch dressing, and low-fat chocolate milk.

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