

UPDATE: School Milk & Supply Chain Challenges

School Year 2023-2024

Importance of School Meals & Milk

School meals contribute significantly to the nutrition and health of our nation's youth and to the well-being of families and communities. The nutritional quality of school meals make them a vital resource to nourish nearly 30 million children every school day. According to USDA FNS, children who participate in school meals consume more dairy milk, fruits and vegetables than non-participants and they also consume fewer desserts, snacks and non-milk beverages.¹

Milk plays a critical role in school meals, providing [13 essential nutrients](#) important for growth and development, and about 77% of daily milk consumption for low-income children ages 5-18 comes from the national school meal programs. This underscores the importance of milk as part of school meals to help children meet their nutritional needs for growth and development.²



School Milk Carton Supply Issues

A major supplier of half-pint cartons is experiencing supply chain shortages, which is having an impact on the ability to fulfill school milk orders in some areas. There is no shortage of dairy milk, rather there is a shortage of the half-pint cartons in which most school milk is packaged.

The carton supply challenges are sporadic and milk processors remain committed to finding solutions to provide schools with nutritious and wholesome milk. Although all parties hope the shortage will be alleviated quickly, National Dairy Council has no definitive information about timing. We encourage schools to work with their local milk provider to ensure milk is available to students through school meals.



OPTIONS

To help mitigate some of the supply chain challenges, here are a few potential options:

Communication

- Affected processors have already sent communications to their school customers and are committed to keeping their districts updated.
- It's essential for dairy suppliers to effectively communicate any change or adjustment to orders or deliveries, including changes to fat levels, flavors, quantity, packaging, etc.
- Schools may want to proactively contact their processor to obtain information about whether they are likely to be affected.

Recent Food and Nutrition Service memo

- A recent [USDA FNS memo](#) indicates the following flexibilities for Child Nutrition Programs experiencing supply shortages:³
 - Program operators are expected to meet the fluid milk requirements to the greatest extent possible.
 - Limiting the milk variety requirement or adjusting serving size, would be considered a temporary emergency condition for purposes of this flexibility.
 - State agencies may allow operators to serve meals during an emergency period with an alternate form of fluid milk or without fluid milk.
- FNS instructs state agencies to share the agency's memo with operators. State agencies have the authority to make specific flexibilities available.

Operational options

- Limit the variety of milk options offered.
- Source milk in gallons or half-gallons and pour milk for service.
 - Use 9-ounce cups with or without lids, depending on the service model.
 - Pre-portion milk for elementary students.
 - Self-service option for middle/high school students.
 - Explore the use of milk dispensers
 - Portable [insulated beverage dispenser](#) with a faucet for easy self-service. The insulated server will keep the milk cold and can hold multiple gallons of milk.
 - Traditional [stainless-steel dispenser](#) that is more permanent. Check with your milk processor to ensure they can provide milk in bags in advance.
- Source shelf-stable milk
 - Shelf-stable milk, also known as UHT (Ultra High Temperature) or aseptic milk, is the same milk offered in cartons. The only difference is in the processing and packaging of the product, which is not currently experiencing a supply shortage.
 - Processing: Shelf-stable milk is heated to a higher temperature than conventional processing to eliminate 100% of the bacteria. There are no preservatives or additives used to process shelf-stable milk.
 - Packaging: Shelf-stable milk is packaged in an airtight, sterile container which does not require refrigeration until the package is open. Therefore, unopened packages can move in/out of coolers and maintain food safety parameters.
 - Service: For best taste and student experience, shelf-stable milk should be refrigerated to under 35 degrees before service.
 - Availability: Shelf-stable milk is currently available through most dairy processors and food distributors.
 - Having shelf-stable milk on hand can help alleviate worry about potential gaps and assist in contingency planning for supply chain disruptions or bad weather days.

We encourage schools to work with their local milk provider on solutions to ensure milk is available to students through school meals. Please contact your [Local Dairy Council](#) for additional information on dairy's essential role in school meals.

References:

- 1) USDA FNS Infographic: [Lunches Consumed From School Are the Most Nutritious](#), June 2021. Findings are from the School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study conducted by Mathematica.
- 2) Cullen & Chen. [The contribution of the USDA school breakfast and lunch program meals to student daily dietary intake](#). *Prev Med Rep*. 2017
- 3) USDA FNS Memo: [Clarification of Allowable Flexibilities for Child Nutrition Programs Experiencing Milk Supply Shortages](#), October 25, 2023