

To Improve School Foods and Address Childhood Obesity: Redefine “Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value”

Recommendation: Congress should call for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to update the definition of foods of minimal nutritional value (FMNV) to make it more consistent with current science and dietary concerns related to children.

Background:

- **Nutrition science has evolved since USDA defined foods of minimal nutritional value in 1979. The current definition of FMNV is arbitrary and no longer makes sense from the standpoint of nutrition, science, current dietary patterns, and health.** The only nutritional criteria for FMNV are that they provide less than 5% of the Reference Daily Intake (RDI) for eight specified nutrients per serving.¹ The definition ignores other important nutritional considerations.

Over the past several decades, there has been a shift in the primary concerns regarding children's diets. In the past, deficiencies of calories, protein, vitamins, and minerals were the main problems. More recently, concerns regarding over-consumption of calories, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, refined sugars, and sodium have grown. Scientific evidence demonstrates that excessive consumption of those constituents contributes to obesity, heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and tooth decay.

- Many low-nutrition foods are not considered FMNV despite their high contents of calories, saturated fat, salt, or added sugars, and thus can be sold anywhere on school campuses anytime during the school day.

The current definition of “Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value” results in arbitrary limits on the sale of foods in school cafeterias.

Allowed:

Fruitades (with little juice)
French fries
Ice cream
Snickers candy bars
Oreos cookies
Cheetos
Snack cakes
Donuts

Not Allowed:

Seltzer water
Cracker Jacks
Popsicles (without fruit/fruit juice)
Jelly beans
Chewing gum
Lollipops
Cotton candy
Breath mints

- Selling low-nutrition foods out of vending machines, snack lines, school stores, and other venues undermines the significant federal investment in school meals, which are required by Congress and USDA to meet detailed nutrition standards.
- USDA lacks authority to update the definition of "foods of minimal nutritional value" and extend it to cover the whole school campus and school day. Congress would need to grant that authority.
- During meal periods, the sale of FMNV is prohibited by federal regulations in areas of the school where USDA school meals are sold or eaten. However, **FMNV can be sold anywhere else on-campus -- including just outside the cafeteria -- at any time.**

For more information, contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at <jjohanson@cspinet.org> or 202-777-8351.

ⁱ Federal Register: 7 CFR § 210.11. "Requirements for School Food Authority Participation, Competitive Food Services."