

Safe Use of Salad Bars in Schools

Minnesota Department of Agriculture; Minnesota Department of Health; University of Minnesota Extension

Introduction

Research and experience have shown that school children significantly increase their consumption of fruits and vegetables when they are given a variety of choices at a school fruit and vegetable salad bar. This experience can lead to a lifetime of healthy food choices. Therefore, public and private agencies throughout the country are working together to expand the use of salad choice bars. (www.health.state.mn.us/divs/hpcd/chp/cdr/nutrition/FTS/saladbars-schools.html).

The Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture encourages schools to follow food safety standards and best practices with all foods served in school meal programs. The addition of salad bars to these programs raises new concerns. This fact sheet provides answers to frequently asked questions about regulatory and food safety matters related to salad bars in Minnesota schools.

PART ONE: REGULATORY MATTERS

Can any school have a self-service salad bar?

Yes. There has been some confusion that salad bars are only allowed in elementary schools if the food is either pre-wrapped or served by a school nutrition employee. This is not the case.

Elementary students are allowed to self-serve from salad bars that are designed specifically for small children. These salad bars must have a plastic barrier (food shield) positioned at the appropriate height for small children, and have a lower serving surface than full-sized salad bars. If a school serves meals to children in early and middle grades and only has a full-sized salad bar, food for the younger children can be pre-packaged or served by an adult.

Will a new menu mean other new requirements from the health inspector?

Any time you add a new food process, equipment, or a time and temperature sensitive food item, you should involve your state or local health inspector before and during the menu change. The health inspector can help assess food safety risks and identify practices to reduce those risks. They can also help you to decide if the changes you are planning will require plan review by your regulatory authority.

When time and temperature sensitive foods are added to the menu, you will need standard procedures to support your HACCP plan for safely handling these items. Such procedures might include guidelines for purchasing, receiving, storage, washing, processing, holding, temperature logging, serving and re-serving of fresh produce.



Approved Source

The Minnesota Food Code requires that all food sold or served to the public must be obtained from an approved source. Produce for canning may be purchased from any approved supplier or directly from an unlicensed grower, if the food is grown on the seller's own or rented land.

MN Food Code: Minnesota Rules, Chapter 4626:
<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/rules/?id=4626>

Note: Food prepared or stored in a private home or an unlicensed facility may not be served or sold in any food establishment, except as allowed by Minnesota Statutes, Sections 28A.15 and 157.22, clauses (6) and (7) which are specific farmers' market exclusions including the pickle bill.

What kind of equipment will we need?

First, you must have a food preparation sink for washing fruits and vegetables, as required by the Minnesota Food Code (4626.0780). This sink cannot be used for any other purpose such as washing hands, meat or dishes.

For the salad bar itself, you may use a mechanically cooled unit, or a non-mechanically cooled salad bar along with time as a public health control. Any unit must be NSF approved. You may also use an existing refrigerated service line with cold wells and food shields. One-sided service will be slower but will make it easier to monitor the salad bar and to assist younger children.

The Minnesota Food Code (4626.0395) requires potentially hazardous food (PHF) (e.g., cut fruits and vegetables, ready-to-eat meats, cottage cheese) be kept in mechanical refrigeration at 41°F or below, and hot foods at 140°F or above.

If we plan to use a salad bar that is not mechanically cooled, what steps must we take to use time as a public health control?

First, submit prior written notification to the regulatory authority of your intention to use time as a public health control.

Maintain a written copy of your detailed plan to use time as a public health control and make it available upon request. The plan must include details about how you will:

- Maintain food temperatures according to the Food Code.
- Clearly mark food containers to indicate the time that the food will expire (no more than four hours after food is removed from temperature control)
- Discard food that is unmarked or for which the time has expired, and
- Discard food at the end of meal service, even if it has not been four hours since the food was placed on the salad bar. Exception: Whole fruits can be re-washed and reused.

Can salad bar foods be part or all of a reimbursable meal?

Salad bar offerings can be part of a reimbursable meal for schools participating in the National School Lunch Program. The salad bar can be utilized to provide all the meal components, or salad bars can be limited to offering a selection of vegetables and fruits that will augment the rest of the components of a reimbursable meal served elsewhere in the cafeteria line.

PART TWO: HEALTH AND HYGIENE

“Handwashing is the single most important means of preventing the spread of infection.”

Centers for Disease Control

Kitchen staff: School nutrition staff already understand the importance of handwashing. Hand hygiene reminders must be reinforced when you introduce fresh fruit and vegetables to the kitchen and the menu.

Kitchen staff must continue to wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after using the toilet or changing tasks. Wash hands before handling or cutting fresh produce. Use gloves or a clean utensil to touch ready-to-eat produce. Wash hands before putting on disposable gloves and change gloves when they may have been contaminated or in-between tasks.

Re-train staff on the importance of illness reporting and logging. Make sure that food service workers do not work while ill, and stay away from the kitchen for 72 hours after their last episode of vomiting or diarrhea. To avoid non-food related outbreaks, re-train maintenance staff on the correct way to clean-up after accidents involving feces or vomit. We recommend a written plan for changing food service if the school has a very high number of colds, flu or gastrointestinal illnesses. This plan could include pre-packaging raw foods or discontinuing self-serve during that period of time.

Students: You may prevent students from touching food at the salad bar but you cannot prevent them from handling these foods while they eat. It is important that students come to lunch with properly cleaned hands. It is recommended that a universal handwashing policy be in place before your salad bar program begins.

Handwashing education must be included as part of the pre-salad bar education and information campaign for families, staff, and students. Handwashing education that includes family members will help reinforce good hygiene behaviors taught at school. Student handwashing needs to be promoted, monitored, and reinforced by staff at all levels. Remember, hand sanitizers are NOT a substitute for handwashing with soap and water.



PART THREE: FOOD SAFETY CONCERNS

Education

A successful salad bar program will include education and training before the salad bar arrives, and continuing education as it is used in the school.

Before the salad bar arrives: Send information home to families about the salad bar, including handwashing and salad bar etiquette. Discuss the salad bar and new menu at school meetings and conferences.

In the kitchen: Provide fresh produce training for all food service staff. Discuss personal hygiene, salad bar maintenance, cleaning, monitoring, and other changes to the mealtime routine.

In the classroom: Spend time in the classroom to discuss new menu items and teach children about salad bar manners. Teach them why they must use utensils to handle food and stay behind the sneeze guard. Explain the importance of trying new foods and to take only as much as they will eat. Especially for the early grades (K-3), having classroom exercises incorporating the use of various styles of tongs would help build student confidence in their use.

At the salad bar: Use signs with pictures to remind students about handwashing, salad bar manners, and portion sizes. Provide adequate monitoring for when they forget.

Source, selection, and shipments

Good food safety practices begin when you select a vendor that not only provides quality food at a good price but also delivers fresh, unblemished fruits and vegetables that are properly dated, labeled, packaged and transported. Kitchen staff must carefully examine deliveries of fresh produce and be prepared to reject food that is old, over-ripe, bruised or damaged. After receipt, store produce immediately in dry or cold storage. Keep in original packaging or label to identify source. Make sure to store produce away from chemical products in dry storage, and away from raw meat, poultry and eggs in refrigerators or walk-in coolers. Store produce at least six inches off the floor, below the ceiling and away from the wall.

“Shower, never bathe” fruits and veggies

All but pre-washed fresh fruits and vegetables must be washed before they are peeled, cut, processed, served or eaten. Foodborne pathogens will spread easily from one fruit or vegetable to others if they are soaked in water. Always wash fresh fruits and vegetables under a running tap.

- It is not necessary to rewash packaged produce labeled “ready-to-eat,” or “washed”.



- Wash all other produce - even those with skins and rinds that will not be eaten.
- Rub firm-skin fruits and vegetables under running tap water or scrub with a clean vegetable brush while washing under a running tap.
- To wash tomatoes, the water temperature should be at least 10 °F warmer than the tomatoes. This prevents the absorption of bacteria into the tomato.
- Dry fruits and vegetables with a clean paper towel.
- Never use detergent, bleach or the dishwasher to wash produce.
- Chemical washes, if used, must be approved for use on foods and used according to the manufacturer’s directions.

Avoid cross-contamination

In the kitchen: Always separate raw foods from ready-to-eat and cooked foods. Store and prepare each produce item separately. Document produce use on production record. Use a different, clean cutting board and utensils (e.g., knives) for each food item. Wash, rinse, sanitize and air-dry kitchen tools, utensils, cutting boards, other surfaces and containers that come into contact with produce immediately after using them.

At the salad bar: Consider using longer handled utensils, especially for younger students. Use separate utensils for each container. Be sure to change-out utensils every four hours or sooner if the food contact area has been touched or the utensil has been dropped or placed in the wrong container, and whenever you change-out the food container. If students return to the salad bar, be sure they use a clean plate. Consider changing utensils after each individual class or after each “run.”

Never add food to a partially full container on the salad bar. Replace food containers when they are getting low in product, empty or have been contaminated.

Monitor salad bars to prevent students from ducking under sneeze guards, touching food with their hands, returning food, using utensils in more than one food container, or taking unmanageable portions.

Use reminder signs – with more pictures than words - to help students remember their salad bar manners.

After meal service: Clean and sanitize the entire salad bar at the end of each day's meal service.

Saving leftovers and minimizing waste

Keep time and temperature logs for all foods on any type of salad bar. All PHF foods from a non-mechanically cooled salad bar and cold foods that have been out of the refrigerator or the mechanically cooled salad bar for four hours must be discarded. You must also discard food that has been mixed with other foods, or touched with bare hands. You may choose to save leftover food from a mechanically cooled salad bar to reuse the next day if the proper temperature has been maintained and has been recorded on the time and temperature log.

However, given the high potential for contamination of food items on a salad bar, the Minnesota Department of Health strongly recommends that leftovers only be saved to be used in a cooked product the next day.

If you choose to save leftovers for any purpose, cover and store them immediately. Mark containers with the date they were prepared. The food can be held for seven days, including the day it was prepared, provided the PHF has been maintained at 41°F or below. Minnesota Food Code (4626.0400)

Never combine leftovers with a new batch of the same food. Leftover food must be put out alone and used up before any new product is introduced.

To avoid waste, monitor portion size, particularly with smaller children. Use half-size or half-full containers of less popular items and food items typically selected in smaller portions. Half-fill containers near the end of service.

For more information

Minnesota Department of Health, Let's Move Salad Bars to School website and resource page, www.health.state.mn.us/divs/hpcd/chp/cdr/nutrition/FTS/saladbars-schools.html

National Food Service Management Institute's (NFSMI) Best Practices: Handling Fresh Produce in Schools, www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/ffvp/bestpractices.pdf

USDA and NSFMI Fact Sheet on Handling Fresh Produce on Salad Bars, <http://nfsmi.org/documentlibraryfiles/PDF/20110822025744.pdf>

"Tricks of the Trade: Serving Options for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables": www.fns.usda.gov/tn/resources/tricks_trade.pdf

Centers for Disease Control Norovirus: Facts for Food Handlers www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/gastro/downloads/norovirus-foodhandlers.pdf

NFSMI Produce Safety resources, including videos, factsheets and PowerPoint presentations <http://nfsmi.org/ResourceOverview.aspx?ID=394>

Minnesota Department of Health Salad Bars and Food Safety Resource List,

www.health.state.mn.us/divs/hpcd/chp/cdr/nutrition/docsandpdf/saladbarsandfoodsafetyresourcelist.pdf

The LunchBox Salad Bars – The LunchBox Guide, www.thelunchbox.org/sites/default/files/Salad%20Bars-The%20Lunch%20Box%20Guide_v1_0.pdf

www.mda.state.mn.us/food

651-201-6027 • 1-800-697-AGRI

www.health.state.mn.us/foodsafety

651-201-5000 • 1-800-657-3908

www.extension.umn.edu/foodsafety

612-624-1222

www.health.state.mn.us/fts

