

Gluten-Free Tips for the School Cafeteria

Children's National Health System Celiac Disease Program



Tips for Gluten-Free Protocols in School Cafeterias

While there are many ways to approach setting up a gluten-free protocol, below are some areas that every cafeteria should consider modifying.

Salad or Sandwich Bar

Fresh fruits, proteins, and vegetables are key ingredients in a gluten-free diet, making a salad or sandwich bar the perfect place for students with celiac disease to find safe and healthy foods. However, cross-contamination on these bars can become a big safety issue if gluten-containing ingredients are improperly placed on the bar. To keep a salad and sandwich bar safe for gluten-free students, keep the following protocols in mind when setting the bar up each day:

- Always place gluten-containing ingredients like bread, croutons, pita chips, and crackers at the far end of the bar so they are set away from the fresh vegetables, proteins, and fruits
- Keep gluten-free bread separate from traditional wheat bread to prevent confusion and contamination
- Place gluten-containing products in the front row of the salad bar so students do not need to drag them over the top of gluten-free ingredients to access them if both must be near each other. This will greatly reduce the risk of cross-contamination
- Always serve salad dressing in squeeze bottles so the dressing never comes in contact with gluten-containing foods

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Squeeze Bottles for Condiments

Always use squeeze bottles for condiments like ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, salad dressings, sauces, relish, and chocolate sauce. Squeeze bottles prevent cross-contamination and allow all students to use the same condiment products without concern for double dipping.

Pantry Organization

When setting up the storage pantry, always store gluten-free ingredients on top of gluten-containing ingredients to prevent gluten-containing particles from falling into the gluten-free products.

Base Products

Most cafeterias use soup and sauce bases that contain gluten. The most common are products that use wheat flour as a thickening agent. Here are a few ways to easily adjust items so all students can enjoy the same foods:

- **Soup and sauce bases:** Order bases that use cornstarch, tapioca starch, or arrowroot as the thickener. There will be no discernable difference in taste or price. By making this small modification, all students will be able to enjoy the same foods.
- **Chips:** Simply order corn chips instead of wheat-based tortilla chips. The price may actually go down because of this change. For taco days, use corn tortillas instead of flour tortillas.
- **Pasta in soups:** When making chicken noodle or minestrone soup, for example, do not put the noodles into the soup until the students order each bowl. This will allow gluten-free students to eat the vegetable-filled soups and broths safely without noodles. Or, set aside a portion of soup with no noodles for students who require a gluten-free option.

Gluten-Free Specialty Items

Some schools make the decision to order specialty gluten-free items for students to eat at school, while others ask parents to supply these items themselves. The choice is up to each individual school, but here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Gluten-free students want to feel included, and an easy way to do this is by stocking specialty gluten-free items like pizza, pasta, bread, and cookies so they are regularly available. When the special of the day is pizza, simply cook a frozen gluten-free pizza for the gluten-free students. If the special is pasta, make a separate pot of gluten-free pasta in clean water for the gluten-free students to enjoy.
- Most suppliers now readily stock gluten-free items, and they can be added to the weekly order.
- Keep gluten-free bread in the freezer for the gluten-free student to regularly make sandwiches. A dedicated gluten-free toaster should be used for toasting.
- If the school asks parents to provide specialty gluten-free items, set up a regular communication system so the parents are aware of upcoming meals and can adequately provide products for their children.

Communication is Key

Regardless if the school decides to supply gluten-free products or the parents are asked to supply them, the easiest way to ensure a smooth process is for everyone to understand how gluten-free foods will be served safely and how the student can access the food on a daily basis. Once the cafeteria has a plan for organization, be sure to set-up a meeting that includes the parents, student, and necessary school personnel to make sure that everyone has a clear understanding of how the child will obtain the food each day.



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