Nutrition Needs Grab and Go Lesson

How to Change Food Texture for a Child with Special Nutritional Needs

Participating in child care helps the child with special needs develop physical and social skills. It also helps all children learn to accept each other’s differences. Some children may have chewing or swallowing problems that require changes in the texture of foods they are served.

Changes in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Meal Pattern can be made for children with special nutritional needs if they cannot eat the foods normally served. Any change in the meal pattern requires a special diet statement from a recognized medical authority, such as a medical doctor or dietitian. If the substitution to the meal pattern is being made as a result of a medical disability that affects the child’s ability to consume the food served, then the medical statement must be signed by a licensed physician. An example would be severe food allergies that would prompt an anaphylactic response. If the substitution is being requested for any other reason, then the medical statement can be signed by a recognized medical authority. Examples of this would be lactose intolerance or a mild food allergy. Always check with your sponsor or state agency for the requirements in your state. Requirements vary from state to state. Many states have a form that must be completed.

The physician’s statement for children with disabilities should include: the disability; an explanation of why the disability restricts the child’s diet; the major life activity affected; the foods to be omitted; and the foods to be substituted. For children with a disability who only need a modification in texture, instructions from the physician are recommended but not required.
In the case of a disability, the caregiver is required to make reasonable changes for foods listed by the licensed physician on the special diet statement. Ask questions and request additional information in writing if the child’s needs and substitutions are not clear to you.

Meals for children with special nutritional needs can usually be planned from the regular menu. Some foods may need to be substituted, while others may just need a change in texture. Meals for children with special needs should be similar to the meals served to the other children. Choking is always a concern when working with young children and is a particular concern when working with children who have special needs. Watch children while they are eating to make sure they sit quietly and eat slowly. Remind children to take small bites of food and chew food well before swallowing.

**How to Change the Texture of Foods**

Some children have trouble sucking, swallowing, and chewing, so food textures have to be changed. The special diet statement will tell you the kind of texture needed. The statement may refer to the National Dysphagia Diet (NDD) levels of texture modification: NDD Level 1: Dysphagia-Pureed; NDD Level 2: Dysphagia-Mechanical Altered; and NDD Level 3: Dysphagia-Advanced. To get these texture changes, foods may be:

- **Chopped**: Cut the food into small bite-sized pieces using a food chopper, food processor, or knife. (NDD Level 3)

- **Fork-mashed**: Mash food with a fork until it is soft enough and small enough to swallow with little or no chewing. Liquid such as meat broth, vegetable broth, or milk may be used if needed. Do not use bouillon cubes dissolved in water because they are too salty. (NDD Level 2)
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• Blended or pureed: This texture change makes food smooth like pudding. A blender or food processor is used to get this consistency. Use a blender when more liquid foods are needed. For some foods, you may need to add a small amount of liquid as they are pureed to prevent dryness. Add liquids gradually to avoid adding too much. Pureed foods should not be runny, but should have the texture of baby food. (NDD Level 1)

How to Keep Foods Tasty and Looking Good

Fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats are the foods that generally require a change in texture. Some foods, such as mashed potatoes, cooked cereals, and puddings, can be used from the regular menus. Care should be taken to prevent choking.

Meals for children with special needs should strive for variety and look appealing. Use the ideas below to keep foods tasty and looking good when you change the texture.

• Prepare each food separately and serve each one separately. Do not mix foods together.
• Use plates and trays with compartments, or use small bowls to keep foods from mixing.
• Serve foods at the right temperature for the best taste.
• Use a food processor to grind some cooked meats to make them easier to chew.
• Grate cheese.
• Use meat alternates, such as egg salad or cooked dried beans, to substitute for foods harder to chew.
• Be sure all vegetables are well-cooked, or fork-tender.
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- Do not serve vegetables with skins unless they are well-cooked. Peel vegetables when possible.
- Substitute chopped, cooked spinach in place of salad.
- Serve mashed potatoes instead of French fries or tater tots.
- Substitute softer raw fruits, canned fruits, or applesauce for fresh fruits that are harder to chew.
- Substitute noodles, rice, or pasta for breads. Soft yeast bread can form a ball that is hard to swallow.
- Cut whole foods into thin slices or small pieces to help prevent choking. Round foods, such as hot dogs, should be cut into small strips, and then chopped.
- Do not serve any meats that have bones.
- Remove any seeds or other pits from fruit or vegetables.

Keep Food Safe
- Use what you know about keeping foods safe during preparation and service, just as you do with all other foods.
- Be sure to clean and sanitize any special equipment used to prepare or serve the foods. Special equipment could include a food processor or a blender. Remember to take the equipment apart to clean it after each meal service.

References: