



Nutrition and Aging Resource Center

Person-Centered Dining Choices

Senior nutrition programs can offer a variety of dining choices tailored to individual needs and preferences as part of their commitment to providing comprehensive and person-centered services. Whether participants receive meals in congregate settings, via home delivery, or through restaurants, grab-and-go, or food trucks, senior nutrition programs strive to ensure flexibility and choice to meet the changing lifestyles of older adults. Here's a brief guide to help navigate these options effectively.

Assessing the nutritional needs of a potential program participant is the first step in determining the right dining choice. The process should begin with an initial screening. Once needs are identified, participants can be referred to the meal programs that will best meet their needs. Checklists to consider for screening nutritional risk include the following.

- [Determine Your Nutritional Health](#) – Screening tool from The Nutrition Screening Initiative to help assess nutritional risk.
- [Enhanced DETERMINE Checklist](#) – Tool for assessing nutritional risk and malnutrition.

Many states are adding other screening options to evaluate participants further. The following tools can identify those at risk for malnutrition and food insecurity.

- [Malnutrition Screening Tool \(MST\)](#)
- [Six-Item Short Form of the Food Security Survey Module](#)
- [Hunger Vital Sign](#)

Older adults with specific dietary requirements may qualify for medically tailored meals. Dietitians carefully design these meals to meet the unique nutritional needs of individuals with high blood pressure, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, and other health conditions.

Some programs are screening even further to identify social determinants of health and their impact on nutritional needs. In doing so, they may refer older adults to

additional services, including evidence-based programs. Participants with chronic conditions benefit from these programs, as they provide resources for managing health effectively. Senior nutrition programs can collaborate with internal or external partners to make these programs available.

Once nutrition needs are evaluated, dining choices should be offered based on nutrition, abilities, and access to services. The following are different types of dining options that states and local providers can potentially offer to meet the needs of diverse senior populations.

- **Congregate meals:** With over 50 years of proven success, this model is for older adults who are willing and able to travel to congregate sites. These programs provide nutritious meals while also helping to prevent loneliness and social isolation; participants can enjoy a social atmosphere, engaging in conversations with peers over a delicious meal. Congregate meals can be an excellent option for those newly widowed, with dwindling social circles, or who may have recently moved to the area. These sites are often housed in senior centers or recreational facilities, which can encourage more physical activity and connect seniors to information and assistance.
- **Home-delivered meals:** Another option with over 50 years of proven success, home-delivery ensures that participants still have access to nutritious meals, even when faced with barriers such as limited mobility or lack of transportation, whether those barriers are temporary or permanent. For example, home-delivered meals can provide essential nourishment during recovery if an older adult experiences a fall or other injury that makes it difficult for them to get around. This option does provide some social connection, as participants get to interact with the delivery driver on a regular—sometimes daily—basis. This option is normally offered through an area agency on aging as intake or screening is completed. Participants can often be connected to other home and community-based services.
- **Restaurant models:** Restaurant programs build on the traditional congregate and home-delivered meal structure to offer restaurant-prepared meals to older adults. These meals can be served within restaurants through voucher programs or via catering in a traditional congregate setting, meal delivery, or take-out. These programs will vary in design and implementation based on local community needs and interests. These models may allow participants to dine with family and friends who are ineligible for the nutrition program. If older adults do not have an existing circle to dine with, providing connections to others or to additional services may take more focused attention. [Senior](#)

[Nutrition Programs: Restaurant Program Toolkit](#) showcases some best practices for this dining model.

- **Grab-and-go:** This option provides flexibility for older adults who are food insecure or at risk for malnutrition and have busy schedules or prefer on-the-go dining. For example, an older adult who has taken up part-time employment may find grab-and-go options more suitable due to their work schedule. A grandparent who is raising a grandchild and needs nourishment may also find this option useful. Grab-and-go may also work well for participants who have a language barrier and feel uncomfortable attending congregate meals. This option provides only quick interactions, so focused efforts to provide engagement and connect participants to resources may be challenging. [Grab and Go 101: A Quick Guide for Aging Nutrition Programs](#) has more information on this dining model.
- **Food trucks:** This mobile option can bring meals to parks, farmers markets, senior housing, and many other locations to reach participants who may not otherwise have access to meal sites. Food trucks can also help support senior center events or provide opportunities for participants to dine with family and friends who are ineligible for the nutrition program. As with Grab-and-Go, food trucks may appeal to participants with language barriers. Check out [Food Truck 101 for Senior Nutrition Programs](#) for more information.

Senior nutrition programs may find that they can best meet their participants' needs by offering a mixture of services. For example, a participant may attend the congregate setting three days a week but require home-delivered meals two days a week due to lack of transportation. Or a participant who receives home-delivered meals four days a week may opt for a grab-and-go meal once a week when their child picks them up for a visit. The more flexibility a program can offer, the more needs it can meet.

Senior nutrition programs are committed to providing diverse dining choices to meet the unique needs of older adults. Through collaborative efforts and tailored services, these programs promote health, well-being, and independence among program participants.

For more information, visit acl.gov/senior-nutrition. Check back frequently – innovative ideas in senior nutrition programs are updated often.

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