

Broccoli is on the plate but what is Quinoa? Taking obesity off the menu!
Color Coding Menu Guidelines
Child Care Food Program Roundtable Conference October 2014

Color coded menus are an educational tool that helps the community of educators, children and their families understand how to make healthy food choices. It is also a way for us, as the people who make the food choices to think about what we are providing to our young learners when they spend time with us in our programs. Typically, children in our fulltime care will have as many as 250 breakfasts and/or snacks and 250 lunches each year—and can learn the life skill of healthy eating from each opportunity.

So how do you know what color a particular menu item is? You need to think about the recipe or the list of ingredients on the package that the food originates from. When considering the recipe you must list the ingredients by their weight—which is how they are listed on packaged food items. By doing this – it will help you to determine how healthy a menu item really is.

For example if you were making the whole wheat soda bread the ingredients would be listed whole wheat flour, low fat buttermilk, sugar, oats, baking soda. This is a “healthy” menu item and it would be labeled as **Green**. Let’s consider fish sticks—this is the label for the ingredients in a common fish stick:

MINCED ALASKA POLLOCK, ENRICHED BLEACHED WHEAT FLOUR (FLOUR, NIACIN, IRON, THIAMIN MONONITRATE, RIBOFLAVIN, FOLIC ACID), VEGETABLE OIL (COTTONSEED AND/OR SOYBEAN), WATER, YELLOW CORN FLOUR, **LESS THAN 2% OF:** SUGAR, DEXTROSE, SALT, WHEY, BAKING POWDER (BAKING SODA, SODIUM ALUMINUM PHOSPHATE), YEAST, ONION POWDER, NATURAL FLAVOR, SODIUM TRIPOLYPHOSPHATE (TO RETAIN FISH MOISTURE), TBHQ (TO PROTECT FLAVOR).

So what does the label tell us? Fish is the first ingredient (minced is not its natural state—what is holding the mined fish together?), but bleached white flour and vegetable oil are the second and third. It is impossible to tell if this is a baked or fried fish stick, so you would need to call the company to determine what the cooking method is for the product; my guess is it is fried—most commercially breaded fish products are. If the company baked it, you could label it as **Yellow**, but if the company fried it you would label it as **Red**.

It is also important to remember that processed ingredients are those not found in their natural state. For example, tofu (processed from soybeans), white flour (processed from whole wheat), white rice (processed from brown rice), juice (processed from fruit), and oil (processed out of grains, seeds or nuts). So these items will be categorized as **Less Healthy Foods** or **Least Healthful Foods**.

Some animal proteins are green. They qualify to be green if they have low amounts of saturated fats and higher amount of mono and poly-unsaturated fats. Animal proteins such as fatty fish that are high in Omega 3-s are also green.

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Most Healthy Foods

Think about these being mainly plant based food – or those foods in the form that they are found in nature. These are the best options for disease prevention, total wellness, and giving the life skill of nutrient-dense eating to young learners. We want to see your menu containing about 2/3 of its menu items with a green label when we are done. It is important to practice portion control with the exception of plain raw or steamed veggies.

- Fruits, Vegetable, Legumes (beans), Whole Grains, Now-fat Milk, Now-fat Plain Yogurt.
 - Exceptions are few: russet potatoes & coconuts
- All of these must be prepared with minimal additional FATS – they must be baked, broiled, braised, poached or have modest amounts of healthful fats like olive oil.
 - Lean ANIMAL proteins (fish, skinless white breast meat poultry & eggs)
 - Lean red meat (only eye round roast, very lean chuck, Canadian bacon, pork tenderloin)

Less Healthy Foods

These are less nutrient-dense foods and may contain more unhealthy fats and/or sugar. They would also be menu items that contained refined grains, moderate fat meats (such as dark meat from the chicken), and green items that no longer fit due to preparation. We want to see your menu containing about 1/3 of its menu items with a yellow label when we are done

- Refined Grains (white rice, white pastas, all-purpose flour foods)
- Moderate-Fat Proteins (soy products, dark poultry meats, leaner red meats/pork, bread and baked fish products)
- Veggies/fruits/whole grains/legumes prepared with modest amounts of unhealthy fats (cream, butter)
Low-fat dairy products (1% and 2% milk and low-fat plain yogurt, etc.)
- Extra lean turkey breast deli meat
- Cheese in a serving size of less than 1oz

About foods with added oils—use good judgment – added oils add a lot of calories and fat. If only a small less than 1 tablespoon per serving with olive oil or rice bran oil, go yellow; if more you will have to go red.

Least Healthful Foods

Be mindful these are special treats! These foods when eaten regularly and/or in excessive quantities can contribute to health problems. We want to see your menu containing no more than one red item per week.

- Whole Milk Dairy Products (whole fat milk, whole fat yogurt, etc.)
- High Fat Meats—anything not listed in Green and Yellow categories
- Deli Meat of any type except extra lean turkey breast
- Full fat dairy products, cheese, whole milk and entrees prepared with these (example Mac & Cheese)
- Anything FRIED (like fish sticks or chicken nuggets)
- Anything prepared with added fats in excess of 1 Tablespoon per serving (butter or cream, such as mashed potatoes)