

Nutrition Evaluation of the Emergency Meals-to-You Program (eMTY)

Healthy
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Research

Executive Summary | June 2022



Overview

Over the summer of 2020, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Emergency Meals-to-You (eMTY) program provided meals to rural children in households with lower incomes through home-delivered boxes of shelf-stable food. The program was run by the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty in partnership with Chartwells K12, PepsiCo Food for Good, and McLane Global. Every two weeks, a box containing food for 10 breakfasts and 10 lunches—enough for two weeks—was delivered to the student’s home or to a centralized location when necessary. The meals were planned to meet the USDA Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) nutrition standards. In total the eMTY program delivered over 37 million meals to the homes of over 275,000 rural children in 43 states.



Evaluation Questions

An evaluation of the nutritional quality of the eMTY program was carried out by the University of Minnesota Nutrition Coordinating Center (NCC) in partnership with Healthy Eating Research, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Analyses were carried out to address three evaluation objectives:

1. To determine whether and to what extent meals delivered through the eMTY program complied with required USDA SFSP nutrition standards.
2. To examine the extent to which the menus met USDA National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) nutrition standards.
3. To examine the extent to which the meals aligned with key dietary recommendations in the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans as measured using the Healthy Eating Index-2015 (HEI-2015), a composite index score ranging from 0-100 with higher scores indicating healthier meals.

Findings

Key Findings on the Nutritional Quality of the eMTY Menus

To what extent did meals comply with SFSP nutrition standards?

- All of the menus from the four eMTY program distribution sites fully met the SFSP nutrition standards for breakfast.
- Lunch menus less consistently met SFSP nutrition standards. Compliance with lunch standards was all or mostly observed for fluid milk and whole or enriched grain/bread, but menus inconsistently met requirements for fruits, vegetables, and meat/meat alternatives.

To what extent did meals comply with SBP and NSLP nutrition standards?

- None of the menus met all of the nutrition standards for SBP and NSLP meals.
- eMTY program menus were not required to comply with SBP and NSLP nutrition standards; however, saturated fat, sodium, and trans fat limits were met by substantial proportions of weekly menus.
- Food-based requirements, such as fruit and vegetable, were less frequently met, largely because menus included a type of food that did not meet requirements or did not provide the minimum amount of food required.

To what extent did the meals align with key dietary recommendations in the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans as measured using the Healthy Eating Index-2015 (HEI-2015)?

- The mean total HEI-2015 scores were calculated for weekly breakfast and lunch menus provided by each food distribution site; results ranged across the four sites (see HEI Scores, next page).
- All of the distribution sites scored well for the total fruits, whole fruits, whole grains, dairy, refined grains, and sodium components.
- Scores tended to be low across sites for the total vegetables and greens and beans categories.
- These scores are generally worse (or lower) than recent national assessments of the nutritional quality of meals served through the school breakfast and lunch programs.¹
- However, the mean total HEI-2015 scores across the breakfast and lunch menus provided by each distribution site were significantly higher than the average score for the diets of U.S. children aged 6-17.²

Findings indicate that during the summer of 2020, eMTY menus were fully consistent with SFSP nutrition standards for breakfast; however, standards for lunch were less consistently met. This is largely because most menus did not regularly meet the requirement that each meal contain two or more types of fruits or vegetables and weekly menus sometimes failed to include the required amount of meat/meat alternatives at every meal.

Though there was no requirement that menus meet SBP and NSLP nutrition standards, the research team chose to also evaluate alignment of the menus with these standards as the eMTY program was part of the COVID-19 emergency response to reductions in school meal access due to pandemic-related school closures. Menus consistently met some of the SBP and NSLP standards, such as limits on saturated fat, sodium, and trans fat, but generally the eMTY boxes were less healthy than meals children would have received via the NSLP and SBP had schools been in session.

As a measure of the extent to which the menus provided foods that align with key recommendations in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, HEI-2015 total and components scores (i.e., fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and dairy) were calculated. Higher total scores indicate greater consistency with dietary recommendations. The total HEI score averages for weekly lunch menus were higher than those of weekly breakfast menus, but scores for both weekly lunch and breakfast menus were found to be lower (or less healthy) than total HEI-2010 scores for meals served via the NSLP and SBP in 2014-2015. The overall nutritional quality of the eMTY menus, as measured using the HEI-2015 score, generally exceeded the average nutritional quality of the diet of American children.

HEI Scores

Meal	eMTY HEI Scores ^a	Comparison Scores
Breakfast	63.4 – 88.9	81.5 ^b
Lunch	54.9 – 60.9	71.3 ^b
Overall	63.9 – 87.1	53 ^c

a Mean HEI-2015 scores across breakfast and lunch menus for the week (across sites)

b Mean HEI-2010 scores for SBP and NSLP school meals collected during SY 2014-2015.

c Mean HEI-2015 score for the diets of US children aged 6-17 years

Future Directions

The eMTY program filled a major gap during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing nutritious meals to children living in rural areas; evaluations of the program offer an important opportunity to identify strategies for improving future iterations of the program. Specific considerations to improve the nutritional quality of menus include increasing the amounts of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fat-free (i.e., skim) milk, and calories, while decreasing the amount of fruit juice and 2% or whole milk.

Further research is needed to examine the nutritional quality, accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and waste of the eMTY program in comparison to other USDA summer meal programs, such as the Summer Food Service Program, Summer EBT, Grab and Go School Meals, and other non-congregate meal service options. Unlike these other options, eMTY offers a unique opportunity to provide home-delivered meals to children living in rural areas who may otherwise face barriers to accessing safe and reliable food while school is not in session. For the eMTY program to scale up and serve as a primary mechanism for providing nutritious foods to children living in rural areas, changes need to be made to improve the nutritional quality of the menus to be comparable to what children would otherwise consume in school through the SBP and NSLP programs.



Healthy Eating Research



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About Healthy Eating Research

Healthy Eating Research (HER) is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Technical assistance and direction are provided by Duke University under the direction of Mary Story PhD, RD, program director, and Megan Lott, MPH, RDN, deputy director. HER supports research to identify, analyze, and evaluate environmental and policy strategies that can promote healthy eating among children and prevent childhood obesity. Special emphasis is given to research projects that benefit children and adolescents and their families, especially among lower-income and racial and ethnic minority population groups that are at highest risk for poor health and well-being and nutrition-related health disparities. For more information, visit www.healthyeatingresearch.org or follow HER on Twitter at @HERResearch or Instagram at @HealthyEatingResearch.

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