

# HEALTHY PANTRY PROGRAM TOOLKIT



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# PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Thank you for the important work you do every day to help our neighbors get the food they need. This toolkit is designed to guide you in setting up your Healthy Pantry and in offering healthier food choices to your neighbors.

As you know, many families now rely on food pantries, and many are also affected by health problems like diabetes and heart disease. Because you see neighbors often, your pantry can play a big role in helping people find foods that support their health.

## THE GOAL OF THE SECOND HARVEST FOOD BANK HEALTH PANTRY PROGRAM IS TO:

- Make it easier for neighbors to access healthy foods.
- Provide simple tools and education to help neighbors choose foods that fit their health needs.
- Support client choice as a best practice so neighbors feel respected and can pick the foods that work best for them.
- Connect pantries with nutrition resources and outreach programs offered by Second Harvest.



# PROGRAM FOCUS AREAS



**Food Availability:** We work to offer foods from all five food groups: fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, and dairy. We also try to provide options for neighbors with special health needs or specific cultural or religious food preferences.



**Nutrition and Health Education:** We want to give neighbors easy-to-understand information that helps them make healthy choices that fit their lives.



**Neighbor-Centered:** We aim to make it easier for neighbors to get the foods they need. This includes letting neighbors choose their own food, collecting their feedback, offering information in different languages, and creating a welcoming, culturally inclusive space.



**Strategic Partnerships:** We partner with other groups in the community to help connect neighbors with more support and resources.

# IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS

## WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY?

When people don't have enough to eat and don't know where their next meal will come from.

## WHAT IS NUTRITION SECURITY?

When people both have enough food **AND** have access to foods that help them stay healthy and prevent chronic diseases.

## WHAT ARE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH?

Non-medical factors affecting health, like where you live, how much money you earn, or if you have access to a car

## WHAT ARE DIET-RELATED CHRONIC DISEASES?

Heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers can be strongly affected by the foods we eat and the nutrients we get.

**KNOWING THESE DEFINITIONS  
HELPS IN UNDERSTANDING WHY  
HEALTHY PANTRIES ARE  
IMPORTANT AND HOW THEY  
SUPPORT NEIGHBORS IN MANY  
DIFFERENT WAYS.**



# WHY THIS WORK MATTERS

Many neighbors have long-term health problems like heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease, cancer, or obesity. Poor nutrition is a driver for these conditions happen. In Tennessee, 1 in 5 adults say their health is fair or poor.

## MAKING DIFFICULT DECISIONS

Families facing food insecurity often have to choose between buying food and paying for medicine, housing, utilities, or transportation. To cope, some may look to less nutritious options, like:

- Eating food past the expiration date
- Buying cheaper, less healthy food
- Watering down food or drinks



## NUTRITION AND HEALTH

Households struggling with food insecurity usually eat fewer fruits, vegetables, and dairy products. Low intake of these foods is linked to health problems like high blood pressure and diabetes. In surveyed households, 1 in 3 had someone with diabetes, and more than half had someone with high blood pressure.

## WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT FOR FOOD PANTRIES?

Food pantries are an important part of the community food environment. Many neighbors visit pantries as often as grocery stores. This means pantries can make a big difference by offering healthy foods and helping neighbors make better choices.

# HEALTHY PANTRY PROGRAM TRAININGS

Friendly, excited, and involved Partners are important for helping neighbors make healthy food choices. Because neighbors trust you, you can guide them toward foods that fit their health needs. You don't need to be an expert, you just need to know the basics about health and nutrition, and be able to tell what is true and what is not.

**When looking to set up your Healthy Pantry, this guide will be helpful in providing information about:**

- ➔ Hunger and Health
- ➔ Client Choice Models
- ➔ Healthy Eating Guidelines
- ➔ Nutrition Nudges
- ➔ Nutrition Basics
- ➔ Nutrition Policy and Standards

**You can lead by example when you:** show healthy habits that can help neighbors make better food choices; share your favorite healthy recipes; focus on small, easy changes - we cannot expect anyone to change their whole lifestyle at once.

When neighbors see that these little steps add up, it's easier for them to achieve and keep a healthy lifestyle.

## NUTRITION FACT OR FICTION?

There is a lot of nutrition information online, and it can be hard to know what is true. The Healthy Pantry Program aims to give you and our neighbors nutrition facts that are based on real science.

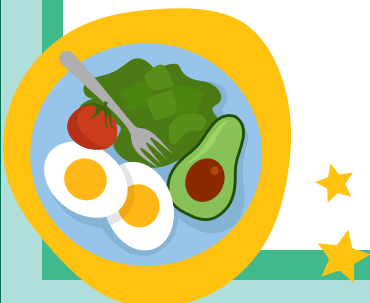
**Evidence-based nutrition** means making food and health recommendations based on the best scientific research.

**Where not to trust:**

- Personal stories or claims that aren't backed by science.
- Always check your sources to make sure the information is reliable.

**Where to find good nutrition information:**

- Registered Dietitians
- Trustworthy websites (look for .gov or .edu)
- Professional groups like the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, American Heart Association, CDC, or NIH



# HUNGER AND HEALTH

At Second Harvest Food Bank, we know healthy neighbors make a strong, happy community. Hunger can harm health and make it harder for people to thrive. We strive to provide healthy foods that respect different cultures and also offer nutrition education. Setting up your Healthy Pantry is vital in connecting these resources to neighbors in need.

Neighbors who don't always have enough food may buy cheaper, less nutritious options from fast food or convenience stores. These foods are cheaper and easy to get but often have high amounts of fat, salt, and calories. Combined with the stress of finances, this can lead to health problems like high blood pressure and diabetes.



Managing these health problems can be expensive. Medicine and doctor visits use up money quickly, and having increased health issues can make working harder. This unfortunate cycle can keep building unless neighbors get the right help.

# HEALTHY EATING GUIDELINES

## WHAT IS A HEALTHY EATING PATTERN?

Healthy eating can look different for everyone. It can fit different tastes, traditions, and budgets. The key is to build a healthy eating pattern by choosing to eat a mix of nutritious foods in the right amounts for your body. One way to do this is by following the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, shown below.

## GET A VARIETY OF NUTRITIOUS FOODS AND BEVERAGES

Eating a variety of foods can help you get the range of nutrients that you need for good health and well-being. Eat foods from all major food groups detailed below - vegetables, fruits, grains, dairy, and protein.

### Fruits



Fresh, frozen, canned, or dried fruits and 100% fruit juice. Try to eat whole fruit most of the time instead of drinking fruit juice.

### Grains



Foods made from wheat, rice, oats, corn, or other grains. For example, bread, pasta, cereal, grits, and tortillas.

### Veggies



Vegetables and 100% vegetable juice. Vegetables are grouped into five types: dark green, red/orange, beans and peas, starchy vegetables, and other.

### Protein



Meat, chicken, fish, eggs, beans, nuts, seeds, and soy foods options.

### Dairy



Milk, yogurt, cheese, lactose-free milk, and soy milk/yogurt; does not include cream cheese or sour cream.

### Oils



Vegetable oil, olive oil, and oils found in foods like fish, avocado, and nuts.

## TRY TO LIMIT:

**Saturated fat** is found in foods like butter, cheese, whole milk, and fatty meats. Try to choose foods with healthier fats, like fish, avocados, nuts, and seeds.

**Added sugars** are sweeteners that are added to foods and drinks and give extra calories.

**Sodium** comes from salt. Most of the sodium we eat comes from packaged foods and restaurant meals.



# NUTRITION BASICS

## READING THE NUTRITION FACTS LABEL

- Everything listed on the label is based on the serving size.
- When looking at the nutrition information, ask yourself, "Is this my whole meal? What other foods am I going to be eating today?" This will help you consume appropriate portions.

Nutrition Facts	
8 servings per container	
<b>Serving size</b>	2/3 cup (55g)
<b>Amount Per Serving</b>	
<b>Calories</b>	<b>230</b>
<b>% Daily Value*</b>	
<b>Total Fat</b> 8g	<b>10%</b>
Saturated Fat 1g	<b>5%</b>
Trans Fat 0g	
<b>Cholesterol</b> 0mg	<b>0%</b>
<b>Sodium</b> 160mg	<b>7%</b>
<b>Total Carbohydrate</b> 37g	<b>13%</b>
Dietary Fiber 4g	<b>14%</b>
Total Sugars 12g	
Includes 10g Added Sugars	<b>20%</b>
<b>Protein</b> 3g	<b>6%</b>
<small>Not a significant source of vitamin D, calcium, iron, and potassium</small>	
<small>*The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.</small>	

### CHECK THE LABEL.

The Nutrition Facts Label can help you choose healthier foods. Look at these parts:

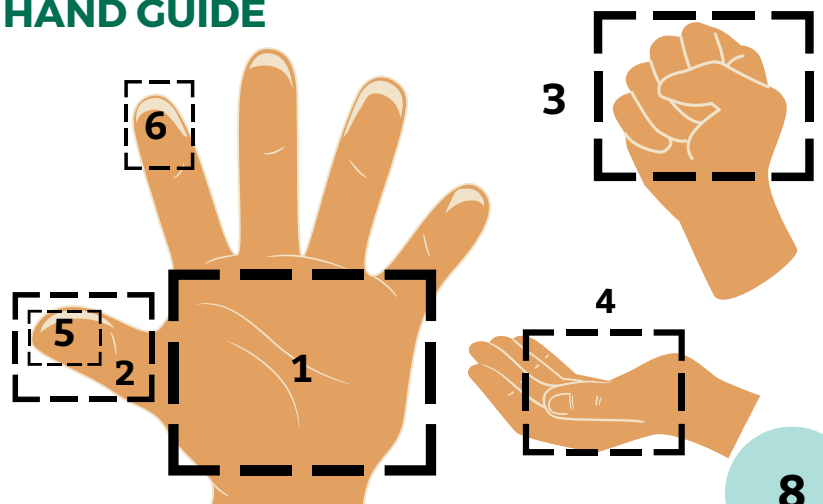
- **Serving Size:** If you eat more than one serving, you get more of everything listed on the label.
- **Calories:** Pay attention to how many calories are in one serving and how many calories you need each day.

You should also look at the **% Daily Values:**

- **5% or less is low** - try and choose foods that are low in saturated fats, added sugars, and sodium.
- **20% or more is high** - try to choose foods that are high in fiber, calcium, potassium, iron, and vitamin D.

## PORTION CONTROL- VISUAL HAND GUIDE

1. 3 ounces of meat, fish, or poultry (palm of hand)
2. 1 ounce of meat or cheese (thumb)
3. 1 cup or 1 medium fruit (fist)
4. 1-2 ounces of nuts (cupped hand)
5. 1 tablespoon (thumb tip)
6. 1 teaspoon (fingertip)



# NUTRITION TIPS & TRICKS

## EAT A VARIETY OF VEGETABLES

- **BEST CHOICES:** Fresh, frozen, and canned vegetables with no added salt (or low sodium)
- **WATCH THE SALT:** Canned vegetables can have a lot of salt. Look for low-sodium options
- **HELPFUL TIP:** If you use canned vegetables, drain and rinse them to wash away some of the salt



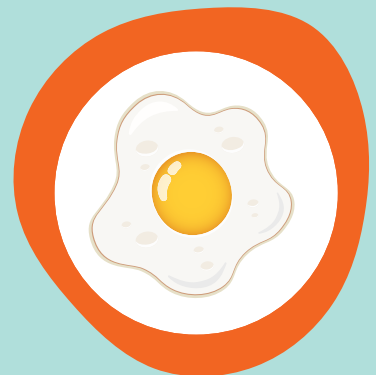
## EAT A VARIETY OF FRUITS

- **BEST CHOICES:** Fresh or frozen fruits with nothing added, 100% fruit juice, or fruits canned in light syrup or 100% juice
- **WATCH FOR SUGAR:** Check the Nutrition Facts label for added sweeteners
- **HELPFUL TIP:** Eat whole fruits when you can because they are a good source of fiber



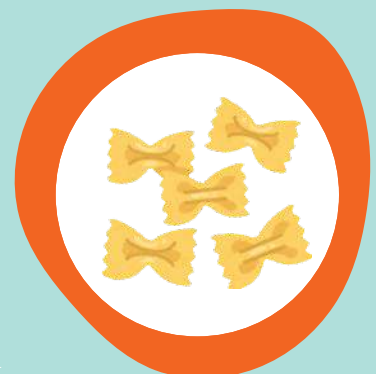
## EAT A VARIETY OF PROTEINS

- **BEST CHOICES:** Fish, beans, lentils, eggs, nuts, and lean meats
- **WATCH FOR ADDITIVES:** Processed meats like lunch meat, bacon, and beef jerky often have extra salt, sugar, and unhealthy fats
- **HELPFUL TIP:** Beans and lentils are good sources of protein, cost less, and can be used in many meals



## MAKE HALF OF YOUR GRAINS WHOLE

- **BEST CHOICES:** Whole grain breads, cereal, pasta, and crackers. Brown rice, oats, plain popcorn, and quinoa
- **HELPFUL TIP:** Check that the first ingredient says “WHOLE” grain



# NUTRITION TIPS FOR NEIGHBORS WITH LIMITED HOUSING

## SPECIAL DIETARY & RESOURCE CONSIDERATIONS

- ➔ Try to avoid highly processed foods like candy, cookies, and sugary cereal. These usually have a lot of sugar and salt.
- ➔ Pick foods that don't need cooking. Microwavable foods or foods that only need a hot plate are best if cooking is needed.
- ➔ Think about dental care and choose softer foods that are easier to chew.
- ➔ For canned foods, use cans with pop-top lids only.
- ➔ Choose foods that are not too heavy or bulky so they are easier to carry.

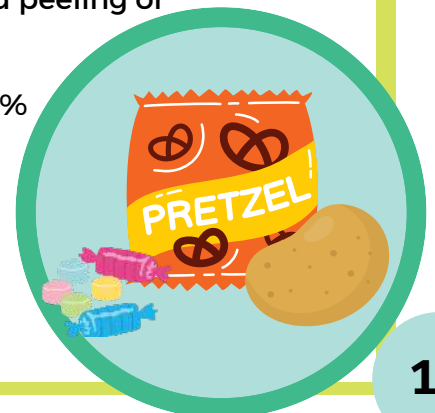
## ITEMS TO PROMOTE

- ➔ Water
- ➔ Canned meats
- ➔ Corn
- ➔ Applesauce
- ➔ Oatmeal
- ➔ Prepared meals
- ➔ Low sodium/sugar canned fruit & vegetables (pop-tops are best)
- ➔ Soft fresh fruit, cut or whole
- ➔ Peanut butter
- ➔ Shelf-stable milk
- ➔ Soft whole-grain bread



## FOODS TO LIMIT

- ➔ Produce that's hard on teeth (celery, carrots, etc.)
- ➔ Uncooked (dried) beans and/or grains like rice or pasta
- ➔ Chocolate
- ➔ Pretzels and salted nuts
- ➔ Cookies
- ➔ Raw foods that need peeling or cooking
- ➔ Juice that is not 100% percent juice
- ➔ Sugary cereal
- ➔ Candy



# NUTRITION NUDGES

## NUTRITION NUDGES

Nudges are a simple, low-cost way to help neighbors make healthy choices and use perishable foods faster. To work well, your team needs to be committed to adding nudges into your pantry or food bank routines.



## STRATEGIES

- Signage and printed materials
- Strategic food placement
- Food pantry layout
- Creative food pairings and displays
- Nutrition education



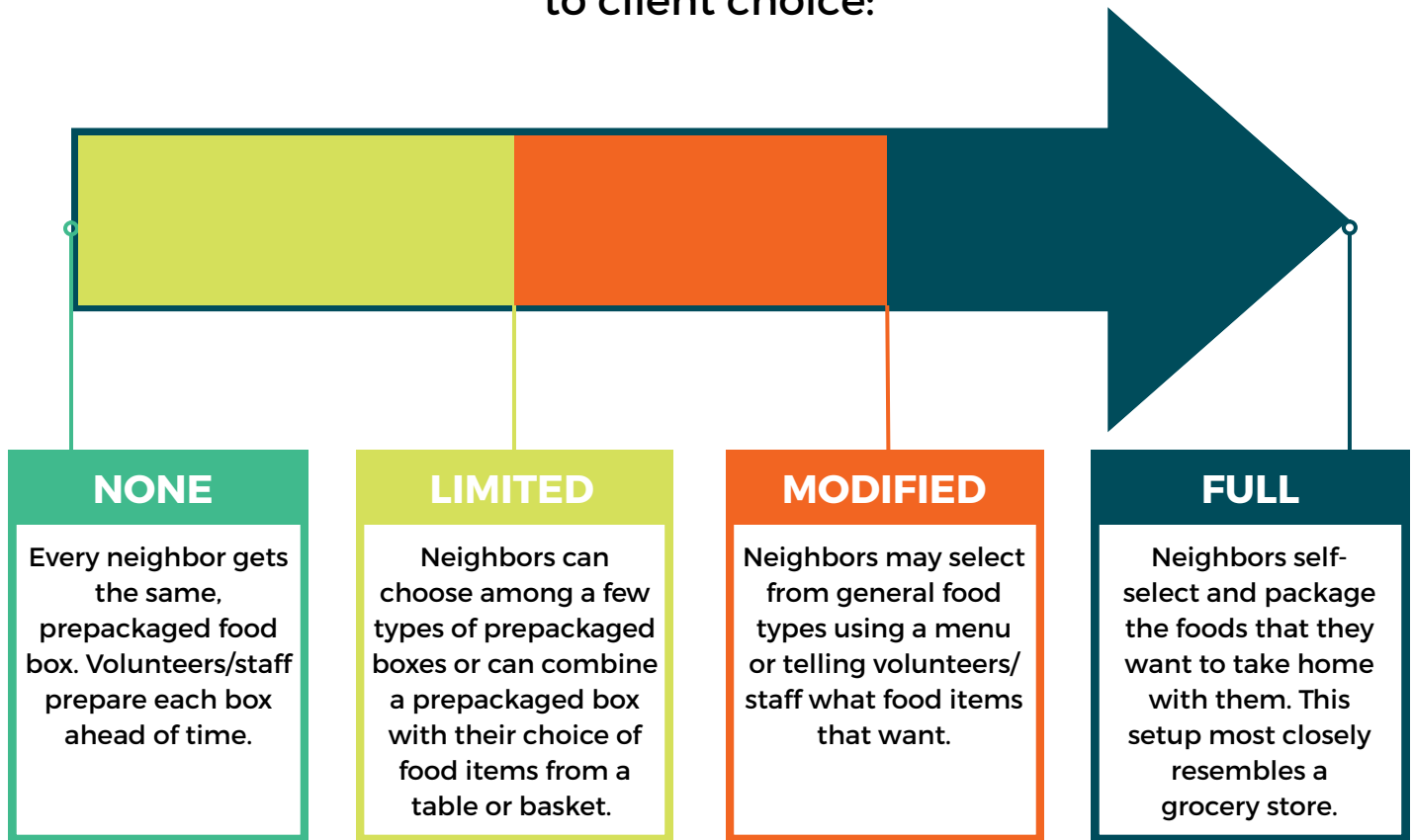
## WHY NUDGES WORK

Nudges help to make the **healthy choice** the **easy choice**. Try placing fruits and vegetables at eye level or adding a creative sign to highlight the nutritional value of food.



# CLIENT CHOICE

Client choice empowers neighbors to select the foods they want to take home, creating a grocery store-like experience that fosters both autonomy and dignity. There are **four levels** to client choice:



## BENEFITS OF OFFERING CHOICE

- ✓ **PROMOTES DIGNITY.** Neighbors have the ability to select foods like in a grocery store.
- ✓ **BETTER MEETS NUTRITION AND CULTURAL NEEDS.** Neighbors are able to choose foods that they prefer and that best meet their needs. This also helps reduce potential food waste.
- ✓ **RICHER VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE.** Volunteers can spend more time engaging with neighbors and building community rather than packing food boxes.
- ✓ **EASIER TO CONTROL INVENTORY AND ORDER FOOD.** By observing what foods neighbors select, it will become easier to order food that people want and will eat.

# CLIENT CHOICE SETUP

## ANY SPACE CAN OFFER CHOICE

**LAYOUT:** Start by considering the layout of your space. Consider how neighbor shopping might flow if you were to implement client choice. **TIP** → Maximize space by using shelving units rather than using table-top displays.

**VOLUNTEERS:** You will likely need to reimagine volunteer roles in order to increase choice. Be open and honest with volunteers about why you are making this transition and how shopping will benefit the neighbors you serve.

**TAKE ONE STEP TO OFFER CHOICE:** For example, you could offer a choice table where neighbors can exchange items they will not use with others or choose from a variety of items like condiments or fresh produce. You could also offer a menu of items for the day. Any level of choice will be beneficial to the neighbors you serve, so there is no problem with starting small!

## CLIENT CHOICE MODELS

### Shelf Model

Food is stocked on shelves and neighbors choose items like how they would in a grocery store.

### Table Model

Food is displayed on tables. Neighbors can choose food from tables and pack their own box or bag. Volunteers are available to assist.

### Online Shopping Model

Neighbors can shop online, picking individual foods and sending requests to the food pantry, like an online grocery shopping setup.

### Menu Model

A list of food items is posted at the food pantry, given to neighbors, or available online. Neighbors may choose foods from the list and volunteers package them.

### Spotlight Model

Neighbors can select a bag or box color based on personal preference. For example, red (standard option), yellow (vegetarian option), green (chronic disease friendly).

### Online Box Model

Neighbors can select from two different food box options with box descriptions on a website interface.

# CLIENT CHOICE CONSIDERATIONS

## SPACE



### Options for Food Pantry Space:

- Neighbors can walk through the pantry and pick their own food.
- Volunteers can pick foods for neighbors using a preference sheet.
- Neighbors can order their food ahead of time.

### You may need to:

- Assign new roles to volunteers.
- Change the layout to give space for neighbors to walk through.
- Plan the flow of people so neighbors and volunteers move safely and efficiently.

## INVENTORY



Letting neighbors choose their own food helps you see what foods they like. This can guide what foods to order or ask for during donation drives. It's a good idea to track how much food is going out of the pantry to make smarter purchasing decisions. Keep in mind that you can still give the same total amount of food as before. Inventory can be managed by setting limits based on household size.

## VOLUNTEERS



Volunteers can spend more personal time with neighbors, building community and sharing nutrition tips. Instead of mainly packing food bags, volunteers become hosts who create a friendly and welcoming environment.

## TIME



The number of neighbors who can shop at the same time depends on the space and how the pantry is organized. Small pantries may only fit 3 neighbors at once, while larger spaces can hold more. Additionally, time is saved because volunteers spend less time packing food bags. This extra time can be used to spend one-on-one with neighbors, making the experience more personal and friendly instead of just a quick transaction.

## TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- Talk to your neighbors. Ask if they like having choices, what benefits or challenges they see, and what foods they want more of.
- Use this information to stock the foods neighbors like best.
- Visit other food pantries that have made the change and learn from their experiences.



# NUTRITION POLICY AND STANDARDS

## PURPOSE

Food pantries play an important role in helping neighbors stay healthy. It's important to offer more healthy foods and show how to use them in meals. This guide will help your organization add nutrition standards and healthy food ideas to your pantry.

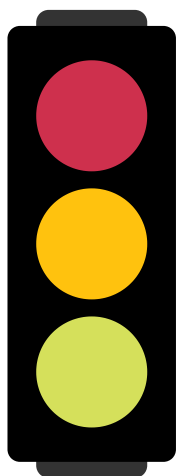
## FOOD RANKING SYSTEMS

Nutrition standards help turn the Dietary Guidelines for Americans into clear steps for food pantries.

### EXISTING RANKING SYSTEMS:

Many systems rate foods based on nutrition, but they may define “healthy” differently. Second Harvest Food Bank uses the Healthy Eating Research, or HER, system and strongly recommends that our partners do the same. There are more details below about the benefits of using the HER system in your Healthy Pantry.

## HEALTHY EATING RESEARCH (HER)



**Summary:** Foods are put into three groups based on how much saturated fat, added sugar, and sodium they have.

**Ranking System:** **Green** - Choose often; **Yellow** - Choose sometimes; **Red** - Choose rarely.

**Strengths:** Up-to-date and easy to understand using the spotlight system. Gives guidance for all food groups.

**Weaknesses:** None identified so far.

# SYSTEM IMPLEMENTATION

## BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF A FOOD RANKING SYSTEM

Based on recommendations from the Nutrition and Obesity Policy Research and Evaluation Network, the following are considered best practices for implementing a food ranking system at the food pantry level.

- Start with an assessment of your food pantry's current setup and needs. This helps decide what healthy food changes to focus on.
- Create a nutrition policy that explains the nutrition standards your pantry will use.
- Use nutrition standards to guide which foods you get (buy or accept as donations) and how foods are organized for neighbors.
- Make sure your plan works for your pantry's resources, staff, and space.
- Add simple strategies to help neighbors pick healthier foods.

Try to make about 70% of your offered foods green or yellow!

## STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

1

Plan how you will check and track your food inventory.

2

Look at which food groups or categories need more healthy options.

3

Create a nutrition policy that shows your goals and plan. Share it with staff, volunteers, and the community.

4

Set up a system to sort foods by food group.

5

Organize foods by category for easy selection.

6

Add simple strategies to encourage neighbors to choose healthier foods.



# DEVELOP YOUR NUTRITION POLICY

Having a nutrition policy shows that your pantry cares about the health of the neighbors you serve. A nutrition policy helps guide which foods are bought or accepted as donations. It can also teach staff, volunteers, and donors about which foods are encouraged and which should be limited. It's best if the policy follows healthy eating guidelines from the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

## HOW TO WRITE A NUTRITION POLICY: THE PIECES

### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this nutrition policy is to guide **[insert Partner Agency name]** in the decisions about the foods to acquire and distribute to our neighbors to promote a more healthful diet. Our nutrition policy communicates to neighbors, volunteers, staff, and the community-at-large that we are committed to providing healthful foods. The policy provides information about the foods to acquire and distribute.



### HEALTHFUL FOODS TO INCREASE COVERED BY THIS POLICY

#### Fruits and Vegetables, including:

- Fresh produce, including more colorful varieties
- Frozen fruits and vegetables with no added sugar or sodium
- Fruits canned in water or 100% juice
- Canned vegetables - no salt added or reduced sodium

#### Whole Grains:

- 100% whole grains such as quinoa, brown rice, barley
- Whole wheat bread and pasta
- Whole grain cereals with less than or equal to 6 grams added sugar
- Plain oatmeal

#### Dairy Foods:

- Fat-free or low-fat unsweetened yogurt
- Skim, 1%, 2%, milk
- Fat-free and reduced-fat cheeses
- Light sour cream

#### Non-Dairy Alternatives:

- Unsweetened almond, rice, cashew, or oat milk
- Unsweetened soy, almond, rice, cashew, and oat milk yogurts
- Non-dairy alternative products with less than or equal to 6 grams added sugar

#### Protein:

- Dried beans and low-sodium canned beans
- Some nut butters
- Fresh poultry and fish
- Eggs
- Low-sodium tuna, salmon, chicken



All these foods were identified using evidence-based research. According to Healthy Eating Research Guidelines, they should be **“chosen often.”**

# CONGRATULATIONS!



Thank you for taking the time to become a Healthy Pantry through this virtual course! We appreciate your partnership and commitment to better serving our neighbors.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Scan this QR code or visit our website at [secondharvestmidtn.org/food-is-medicine](https://secondharvestmidtn.org/food-is-medicine) for nutrition education flyers, healthy recipes, and more!



If your neighbors are needing additional food support outside of your pantry, you can use this QR code or visit <https://www.secondharvestmidtn.org/find-resources/find-food/> to use our Find Food tool for food pantries near you!



If your neighbors are needing additional resources outside of food items, you can visit the United Way of Greater Nashville resource directory at <https://team211.communityos.org/homepage-uwgn>.

If you need more information, have questions, or would like to schedule a meeting for an individual with a background in dietetic work to check your Healthy Pantry, you can reach out via email at [gracie.brocato@secondharvestmidtn.org](mailto:gracie.brocato@secondharvestmidtn.org).