

Healthier Food Donation Guidelines for Retailers and Distributors

A Corporate Resource



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Center for Science in the Public Interest

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is America's food and health watchdog. We are a rigorous driver of food system change to support healthy eating, safe food, and the public's health. We transform the built food environment through leading-edge policy innovations grounded in meticulous research and powerful advocacy at the national, state, and local level. We galvanize allies to drive system-wide changes and healthier norms, leveraging the greatest benefits for people facing the greatest risk. CSPI is fiercely independent; we accept no government or corporate grants. Our work is supported by the hundreds of thousands of subscribers to our award-winning Nutrition Action Healthletter (NAH) and from foundations and individual donors.

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Healthier Food Donation Guidelines for Retailers
and Distributors is available online, free of charge at
<https://cspinet.org/resource/healthier-food-donation-guidelines>

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Why Donate?

Retail food donations benefit the charitable food system (CFS), a network of food banks, food pantries, and other emergency feeding organizations, and the increased number of families who have relied on them for food assistance during the pandemic. [In 2020, 60 million people used the CFS, a 50 percent increase from 2019.](#)

Food banks are the CFS' distribution hubs and the first destination for most retail donations. The CFS relies on retail and distributor donations; on average they comprise [about 30% of food bank inventory](#). But in recent years, [more precise retail inventorying has led to decreased retail donations](#),

even as more people turn to the CFS. And despite client requests for nutritious foods, food banks are still receiving and distributing a high volume of unhealthy food. [A Tipping Point](#), a 2018 report by MAZON, a national anti-hunger organization, and the University of Connecticut's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, found that, on average, 25 percent of food bank distributions are unhealthy food and beverages like sweet and savory snacks, candy, and sugary beverages. It is important that retailers and distributors continue to donate to the CFS and focus on capturing nutritious items.

The following guidelines can help your company create a healthier food donation program.

Healthier food donation programs support food and nutrition security

Nutritious food donations are especially important because people experiencing food insecurity are at [greater risk for preventable, diet-related diseases like heart disease and type 2 diabetes](#). **People accessing the CFS want and deserve high-quality healthy food and beverages:**

- 🍏 In [recent surveys](#), 85 percent of CFS clients said that it was important to have fresh fruits and vegetables available at food pantries, and ranked candy and soda among the least important foods to have available.

But CFS clients are often not getting enough healthy foods and beverages:

- 🥬 [Feeding America's Hunger in America 2014 National Report](#) found that 55 percent of CFS clients identified fresh fruit and vegetables as the most desired item that they did not receive, followed by meat (47 percent), and dairy products (40 percent).
- 🥬 In a [2019 Natural Resources Defense Council, Maryland Food Bank, and Johns Hopkins University survey](#), 24 percent of food pantry clients were very or somewhat unsatisfied with the amount of fresh produce and protein that they received.

Food donations should be nutritious, fresh, and culturally relevant

Freshness. CFS clients often receive produce on the brink of going bad. Consider the remaining shelf-life of fruits and vegetables when donating. If food is nearing the end of its shelf-life, food banks and pantries are less likely to distribute it and may incur landfilling or recycling fees to dispose of it.

Cultural relevancy. It is important that the CFS provide nutritious foods and beverages that align with clients' cultural food preferences. [Black](#), [Hispanic](#), and [Indigenous](#) households face hunger at higher rates than white households. Keep cultural food preferences in mind when deciding what to donate and consult the following resources:

- [Oldways African Heritage Diet Pyramid](#)
- [Oldways Latin American Diet Pyramid](#)
- [Oldways Asian Diet Pyramid](#)

Healthier food and beverage donations benefit retailers and distributors

FINANCIAL BENEFITS

- ▶ **Cost-Savings.** Donation is free. Donating rather than landfilling or recycling saves your company the costly associated fees, and reduces labor costs involved in de-packaging, separating, and disposing of products. One major retailer estimates that, in one of its locations, landfilling costs \$155/ton and composting \$25/ton.
- ▶ **Tax Benefits.** Food and beverage donations are deductible from your corporate federal taxes under the [Enhanced Federal Deduction for Food Donation](#).
- ▶ **Associate buy-in.** Educating associates about the CFS and the positive community impact of retail donation programs can be motivating, turning the work into a mission rather than just another task and potentially enhancing morale.

SOCIAL IMPACT

- ▶ **Reputation.** Donating healthier food and beverages will highlight your company's reputation as a business that gives back to the community and cares about your customers' health and wellbeing.
- ▶ **Community impact.** Donating nutritious food and beverages locally supports communities by improving health. A healthy community means more customers for a longer time.
- ▶ **Sustainability.** Food and beverage donation is good for the environment. It reduces food waste, which produces greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change. Donation can help your company reach its sustainability goals.

Why retailers donate

"We have a vested interest in our communities. If they are not healthy communities, then ultimately it ends up hurting us because we don't have those customers shopping in our stores. We want to keep creating a circular economy."

—Executive at major retailer

"We're role models...we have an obligation to model healthier practices and help the community, and we want to be seen as a leader in those areas."

—Executive at major retailer

"It's the right thing to do...and we have the ability to do so...if it's good, consumable food, the right thing to do is donate it into our communities."

—Executive at major retailer

Quotations from CSPI Key Informant Interviews of Food Retailers, 2020

Donating food and beverages is safe for your company

Your store or company will not be liable for harm caused by consuming donated food. The federal [Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act](#) provides robust protection from civil and criminal liability for grocery products donated in good faith. [All 50 states have liability protection laws for food donation.](#) Furthermore, the charitable food system has well-established food safety standards and is expert at safely delivering donated food and beverages to recipients. Food bank partners will provide food safety guidance.



How to Use CSPI's Healthier Donation Guidelines

These guidelines encourage donors to increase nutritious donations and decrease donations of less healthy items, particularly candy, soda, and desserts.

These guidelines organize foods based on grocery store department.

- 🌱 If your company is just starting to implement a healthier food donation program, it may be easier to use the [Sample Items Table](#) as a guide for choosing products to donate.
- 🌱 If your company is further along, or has support from retail dietitians, we encourage use of the [Nutrient Thresholds Table](#).
- 🌱 These guidelines are based on the Healthy Eating Research (HER) *Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System* and have been adapted to suit retailers and distributors needs. For more details about the guidelines, please visit: [HER Guidelines](#).

SAMPLE ITEMS TABLE*

NEVER DONATE: Sugary beverages (e.g. sports drinks, regular soda, sweetened tea, energy and coffee drinks), candy, ice cream, and desserts except breads with ≤ 6 grams added sugar per serving. <i>Send un-donated items to facilities that compost or anaerobically digest them.</i>			
Store Department	Donate Often	Donate Sometimes	Donate Rarely
PRODUCE DEPARTMENT			
	All produce Plain tofu, tempeh	Seasoned tofu, tempeh, plant-based meat (e.g., burgers, nuggets, and sausages)	All other
DAIRY, CHEESE, AND EGGS DEPARTMENT			
Dairy, Cheese, and Eggs			
	Milk (2%, 1%, skim/fat-free) Cheese (fat-free or low-fat cheese) Fat-free or low-fat cottage cheese Eggs (whole, whites, egg substitutes) Yogurt (unsweetened non-fat or unsweetened low-fat) Sour cream (light, reduced fat, or low-fat) Plain tofu, tempeh	Milk (whole) Cheese (reduced-fat cheese) Full-fat cottage cheese Cream cheese (whipped, light, or reduced fat) Yogurt (low-fat flavored with ≤ 23 grams total sugar, if added sugar not listed) Full-fat sour cream Seasoned tofu, tempeh Plant-based meat (e.g., burgers, nuggets, and sausages)	All other, including flavored milks

Store Department	Donate Often	Donate Sometimes	Donate Rarely
Non-Dairy Alternatives			
	Plant-based milks and yogurts (unsweetened)	Flavored or sweetened plant-based milks Flavored or sweetened plant-based yogurts (with ≤ 11 grams total sugar, if added sugar not listed) Flavored or sweetened plant-based milks (with ≤ 11 grams total sugar, if added sugar not listed) Plant-based cheeses Plant-based sour cream	All other
MEAT AND FISH DEPARTMENT			
	Unbreaded poultry and seafood Plain tofu, tempeh	Breaded poultry and seafood Unprocessed pork and beef Seasoned tofu, tempeh Plant-based meat (e.g., burgers, nuggets, and sausages)	All other, including bacon, sausage, and other processed meat
GROCERY DEPARTMENT			
Mixed Dishes (due to variation in this category, follow thresholds)			
Mixed dishes (entrees, soups, stews, canned pasta, macaroni and cheese) with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤ 3 g saturated fat • ≤ 480 mg sodium • ≤ 6 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.5 - 6 g saturated fat • 481 – 599 mg sodium • 7 – 11 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 6.5 g saturated fat • ≥ 600 mg sodium • ≥ 12 g added sugar

Store Department	Donate Often	Donate Sometimes	Donate Rarely
Canned and Dried Fruits and Vegetables			
	<p>Canned vegetables, including tomato products (no or low-sodium, no added sugar)</p> <p>Canned fruit (100% fruit juice or water)</p>	<p>Canned vegetables, including tomato products (added sugar or salt)</p> <p>Canned fruit (light syrup)</p> <p>Instant potatoes</p> <p>Plain dried fruit (no added sugar, sodium, or saturated fat)</p>	All other
Shelf-Stable Protein			
	<p>Canned chicken, tuna, salmon, anchovies, sardines (in water or oil, no or low-sodium)</p> <p>Nuts and nut butters</p> <p>Dried beans, canned beans (no or low-sodium)</p> <p>Plain tofu, tempeh</p>	<p>Canned chicken, tuna, salmon, anchovies, sardines (with added salt)</p> <p>Canned beans, including baked beans (added salt or sugar)</p> <p>Seasoned tofu, tempeh</p> <p>Plant-based meat (e.g., burgers, nuggets, and sausages)</p>	All other
Grains			
	<p>Whole grains (e.g., brown rice, quinoa, barley, teff, farro, millet, bulgur, wheatberries)</p> <p>Plain (no-sugar-added) oatmeal or other whole-grain hot cereal</p> <p>Whole wheat flour or other whole-grain flour, masa flour</p> <p>If first ingredient is whole grain: whole wheat pasta, whole grain breads (including 100% corn or 100% whole wheat tortillas), whole grain pancake mix, hot or cold whole grain cereal with ≤ 6 grams added sugar</p>	<p>Refined grain products (white breads, pasta, rice, pancake mix)</p> <p>Hot or cold whole grain cereal with 7 – 11 grams added sugar</p> <p>Non-whole grain cereal with 0-11 grams added sugar</p>	All other

Store Department	Donate Often	Donate Sometimes	Donate Rarely
Beverages			
	Water (plain, unsweetened flavored water or sparkling water) Plain coffee Unsweetened tea (including tea bags)	All 100% juice Sparkling water with sodium (e.g., club soda) Diet beverages Coconut water	See “never donate” box at top of table
Processed/Packaged Snacks			
	None	If first ingredient is whole grain: Rice cakes, granola, cereal, snack bars Plain popped or unpopped popcorn Whole grain pretzels Whole wheat crackers	All other
FROZEN DEPARTMENT			
Frozen Mixed Dishes <i>(due to variation in this category, follow thresholds)</i>			
Frozen mixed dishes (entrees, soups, stews, canned pasta, macaroni and cheese) with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤ 3 g saturated fat • ≤ 480 mg sodium • ≤ 6 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.5 - 6 g saturated fat • 481 – 599 mg sodium • 7 – 11 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 6.5 g saturated fat • ≥ 600 mg sodium • ≥ 12 g added sugar
Frozen Fruits and Vegetables			
	Frozen fruits and vegetables (no added sugar or salt)	Frozen fruits and vegetables (with added sugar or salt)	All other
Frozen Protein			
	Frozen unbreaded poultry and seafood	Frozen breaded poultry and seafood Frozen unprocessed pork and beef Frozen plant-based meat (e.g., burgers, nuggets, and sausages)	All other, including bacon, sausages, and other processed meat

*If uncertain about the category for a specific food not listed in these sample items, please consult the Nutrient Thresholds Table.

NUTRIENT THRESHOLDS TABLE

NEVER DONATE:			
Sugary beverages (e.g. sports drinks, regular soda, sweetened tea, energy and coffee drinks), candy, ice cream and desserts except breads with ≤ 6 grams added sugar per serving. <i>Send un-donated items to facilities that compost or anaerobically digest them.</i>			
Store Department	Donate Often	Donate Sometimes	Donate Rarely
PRODUCE DEPARTMENT*			
	All produce Tofu, tempeh with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤ 2 g saturated fat • ≤ 230 mg sodium • 0 g added sugar 	Plant-based meats (e.g., veggie burgers, nuggets, and sausages) with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 2.5 g saturated fat • 231 -479 mg sodium • 1 -11 g added sugar 	Plant-based meats (e.g., veggie burgers, nuggets, and sausages) with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 2.5 g saturated fat • ≥ 480 mg sodium • ≥ 12 g added sugar
DAIRY, CHEESE, AND EGGS DEPARTMENT*			
Dairy, Cheese, and Eggs			
Milk, cheese, yogurt, and other dairy products with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤ 3 g saturated fat • ≤ 230 mg sodium • 0 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.5 - 6 g saturated fat • 231 - 479 mg sodium • 1 - 11 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 6.5 g saturated fat • ≥ 480 mg sodium • ≥ 12 g added sugar
Non-Dairy Alternatives			
Plant-based products with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤ 2 g saturated fat • ≤ 230 mg sodium • ≤ 6 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 2.5 g saturated fat • 231 – 479 mg sodium • 7 – 11 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 6.5 g saturated fat • ≥ 480 mg sodium • ≥ 12 g added sugar
MEAT AND FISH DEPARTMENT			
Meat, fish, and plant-based meat with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤ 2 g saturated fat • ≤ 230 mg sodium • ≤ 6 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2.5 - 4.5 g saturated fat • 231 – 479 mg sodium • 7 – 11 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 5 g saturated fat • ≥ 480 mg sodium • ≥ 12 g added sugar

Store Department	Donate Often	Donate Sometimes	Donate Rarely
GROCERY DEPARTMENT			
Mixed Dishes			
Mixed dishes (entrees, soups, stews, canned pasta, macaroni and cheese) with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤ 3 g saturated fat • ≤ 480 mg sodium • ≤ 6 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.5 - 6 g saturated fat • 481 – 599 mg sodium • 7 – 11 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 6.5 g saturated fat • ≥ 600 mg sodium • ≥ 12 g added sugar
Canned and Dried Fruits and Vegetables*			
Items with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤ 2 g saturated fat • ≤ 230 mg sodium • 0 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 2.5 g saturated fat • 231 – 479 mg sodium • 1 – 11 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 2.5 g saturated fat • ≥ 480 mg sodium • ≥ 12 g added sugar
Shelf-Stable Protein			
Items with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤ 2 g saturated fat • ≤ 230 mg sodium • ≤ 6 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2.5 - 4.5 g saturated fat • 231 – 479 mg sodium • 7 – 11 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 5 g saturated fat • ≥ 480 mg sodium • ≥ 12 g added sugar
Grains			
	First ingredient must be whole grain AND item must meet the following thresholds: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤ 2 g saturated fat • ≤ 230 mg sodium • ≤ 6 g added sugar 	Items with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 2.5 g saturated fat • 231 – 479 mg sodium • 7 – 11 g added sugar 	Items with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 5 g saturated fat • ≥ 480 mg sodium • ≥ 12 g added sugar
Beverages			
Beverages with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0 g saturated fat • 0 mg sodium • 0 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0 g saturated fat • 1 – 140 mg sodium • 1 – 11 g added sugar 	See “never donate” box at top of table

Store Department	Donate Often	Donate Sometimes	Donate Rarely
Processed/Packaged Snacks			
	None	First ingredient must be whole grain AND item must meet the following thresholds: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0 – 2 g saturated fat • 0 – 140 mg sodium • 0 – 6 g added sugar 	Items with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 2.5 g saturated fat • ≥ 141 mg sodium • ≥ 7 g added sugar
FROZEN DEPARTMENT			
Frozen Mixed Dishes			
Frozen mixed dishes (entrees, soups, stews, canned pasta, macaroni and cheese) with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤ 3 g saturated fat • ≤ 480 mg sodium • ≤ 6 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.5 - 6 g saturated fat • 481 – 599 mg sodium • 7 – 11 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 6.5 g saturated fat • ≥ 600 mg sodium • ≥ 12 g added sugar
Frozen Fruits and Vegetables*			
Items with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤ 2 g saturated fat • ≤ 230 mg sodium • 0 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 2.5 g saturated fat • 231 – 479 mg sodium • 1 – 11 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 2.5 g saturated fat • ≥ 480 mg sodium • ≥ 12 g added sugar
Frozen Protein			
Items with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤ 2 g saturated fat • ≤ 230 mg sodium • ≤ 6 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2.5 - 4.5 g saturated fat • 231 – 479 mg sodium • 7 – 11 g added sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥ 5 g saturated fat • ≥ 480 mg sodium • ≥ 12 g added sugar

*Use the added sugar value when available on the Nutrition Facts Label. If it is not available, use the total sugar value. The thresholds are the same for all categories except fruits and vegetables and dairy. For both fruits and vegetables and dairy, total sugar thresholds are ≤ 11 grams for the “choose often” category, 13 to 23 grams for the “choose sometimes” category, and ≥ 24 grams for the “choose rarely” category.

Going Further

Doing the following can maximize your store or company's effectiveness as a donor:

- ✔ Establish a system for tracking donations by store department (use the above guidelines as a framework) to ensure that you are donating nutritious foods and beverages.
 - Some retailers report their donations by total pounds, but only a few report by store department or food type. Tracking and publicly reporting these donations will improve your brand image and customer loyalty.
- ✔ Set internal goals and benchmarks for improving healthfulness of food donations, tracking the percentage of green, yellow, and red products by store department that your store donates quarterly or annually. Tracking improvements and successes publicly will also prove commitment and improve brand image and customer loyalty. CSPI can work with your company to establish benchmarks.
- ✔ Consider buying food from local farmers/growers that would otherwise go un-harvested or unsold, and donating it to the CFS.
 - For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Publix began buying milk from dairy farmers and [donated it to food banks](#). They received widespread, positive press coverage.

