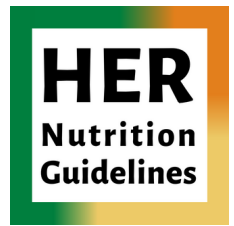


Guidelines to Help Categorize Foods

For Ranking Food Utilizing the HER Guidelines for the Charitable Food System

Updated September 19, 2023

Use these guidelines to help select the correct category when ranking the nutrition quality of many common foods in inventory.



Primary Food Groups: Fruits and Vegetables, Grains, Proteins, Dairy, Non-Dairy Alternatives

Additional Categories: Mixed Dishes, Condiments/Cooking Staples, Processed/Packaged Snacks, Desserts

Guideline 1. Default to a primary food group when possible

When in doubt, default to one of the primary food groups (Fruits and Vegetables, Grains, Proteins, Dairy, Non-Dairy Alternatives) instead of Mixed Dishes or Condiments/Cooking Staples. The reasons are:

- Condiment/cooking staples aren't ranked, so you lose the opportunity to rank a food.
- Mixed dishes have more lenient thresholds, so we want to limit their use

Guideline 2. Combinations from the same primary food group remain in that food group

If a combined food contains multiple items from the same primary food group (e.g., two proteins, three fruits), use the category of the primary food group.

Examples:

- Pork and beans - Proteins
- Fruit cocktail - Fruits and Vegetables
- Rice-quinoa mix - Grains

Guideline 3. You can add flavoring and still stay in the primary food group

When you have a primary ingredient plus flavoring or accent ingredients (such as breadcrumbs or seasoning), use the category of the primary ingredient.

Examples from different categories:

- Fruits and Vegetables
 - Mashed potatoes; Diced tomatoes with Italian herbs; Chili-ready tomatoes; Frozen broccoli and cheese, Corn with butter, Seasoned stir-fry vegetables
- Grains
 - Rice with flavorings, Rice pilaf, Stuffing
- Proteins
 - Chicken wings with Buffalo sauce, Breaded chicken nuggets, Breaded fish sticks, Meatballs, Meatloaf
- Dairy
 - Chocolate milk, Yogurt with fruit

Guideline 4. Judge a Baking Mix by Its Final Form

Mixes are categorized into the food group of their final product. These items are not considered cooking staples.

Examples:

- Grains (Bread mix, Muffin mix, Scone mix, Biscuit mix, Pancake mix, Stuffing/dressing mix)
- Desserts (Cake mix, Cookie mix, Brownie mix)

Guideline 5: Noodles and Pasta

If noodles or pasta are packaged alone, they are categorized as Grains. Products sold as pasta but made of other ingredients (e.g., chickpea, lentils) are Grains. If noodles or pasta are mixed with other primary food group ingredients, they are categorized as Mixed Dishes.

Examples:

- Plain spaghetti - Grains
- Fresh pasta - Grains
- Soups with Noodles - Mixed Dishes
- Ramen - Mixed Dishes (even if the liquid is drained)
- Pasta with Dairy or Protein (e.g., tortellini, ravioli, lasagna) - Mixed Dishes

Guideline 6: Packaged Sauces

Plain tomato sauce belongs in the Fruits and Vegetables category. This typically comes in a can and is shelved with tomato paste and crushed tomatoes in the store. This is a vegetable because there is nothing else in it. Tomato sauce with herbs and seasonings (not specifically packaged as a pasta sauce) is also in Fruits and Vegetables, as indicated in Guideline 3.

All other packaged pasta sauces are Mixed Dishes. This applies whether they are tomato-based, dairy-based or pesto. It also applies whether or not they include meat, vegetables, or other ingredients. They are often shelved together in the store by the pasta.

Examples:

- Spaghetti sauce, tomato-based pasta sauce, vodka sauce, marinara sauce, meat sauces, alfredo
- When in doubt, look at the serving size. Sauces have a serving size larger than condiments (such as ¼ cup vs a tablespoon).

Guideline 7. Defining Mixed Dishes

Use the “mixed dish” category if you have substantial amounts of two or more different food groups mixed together in one dish. These items may be labeled as main dishes, entrees, sides, or appetizers.

Examples:

- macaroni and cheese, spaghetti and tomato sauce, enchiladas, egg rolls, dumplings, soup, rice and beans, fried rice, casseroles.

Guideline 8. Defining Cooking Staples

Cooking staples are “unranked”. They are a single ingredient and not something you typically eat on its own. They come in large packages with many “servings” but are typically used in small amounts compared to the package size. These items are “unranked”.

Examples:

- flour, sugar, butter, oil, salt, baking soda, baking powder, cornstarch, breadcrumbs
- Exception – corn meal is a grain because it is like oatmeal in that you can just add water and eat.

Guideline 9. Defining Condiments

Condiments are “unranked”. These items are typically high in sugar, salt, or fat; however, they are very flavorful and used in small amounts (such as 1-2 Tablespoons) to flavor other foods prepared at home. These items are unranked to allow greater accommodation of different cuisines and cultures.

When in doubt, look at the serving size; if it's small, it's likely a condiment (or cooking staple - refer to guideline 6).

Examples:

- Sweet Condiments
 - Syrups, Jellies, Jams
- Fat Condiments
 - Butter, Oils
- Salty/Umami Condiments
 - Salt, Soy Sauce, Tamari, Vinegars, Miso Paste, Fish Sauce, Barbeque Sauce, Salad Dressings, Tahini, Lemon Juice, Spices
- Dairy-Based Condiments
 - Cream, Whipped Cream, Creamer, Whipping Cream

Guideline 10: Cheese Sauce

If a cheese sauce (ex: nacho cheese) is alone, it is categorized as dairy (see guideline 11 below). If it is added to something, the category may change.

Examples:

- Broccoli & Cheese: Fruit & Vegetable Category (refer to guideline 1 & 3)
- Macaroni & Cheese: Mixed Dish (refer to guideline 7)

Guideline 11: Spreads

Jellies and jams are condiments. However, it is better to rank than not rank, so some spreads are not treated as condiments if they contain protein foods, dairy, or non-dairy alternatives. Look at the key ingredient to select the food group.

Examples:

- Hummus, peanut butter, soy butter, and other nut butters – Proteins
 - Exception: dessert hummus would be categorized in Desserts
- Yogurt spreads (such as labneh, tzatziki, or yogurt fruit dip) – Dairy
- Cheese dip (such as pimento cheese or nacho cheese) – Dairy
- Cream Cheese - Dairy

Guideline 12: Defining Desserts

Foods that are sweet and naturally thought of when talking about desserts. Do not include fruit that is eaten as a dessert (such as 100% fruit popsicles) – that would be a fruit.

Examples:

- Baked Goods
 - Cookies, Brownies, Cake, Lemon Bars, Other Dessert Bars
- Dairy Based Desserts
 - Ice Cream, Frozen Yogurt, Puddings
- Candy, Chocolate, Marshmallows, Cotton Candy

Guideline 13: Coconut Drinks

There are three potential types of coconut drinks.

- The first is “coconut milk” that is used as an ingredient in a recipe. These typically come in a can and have a small serving size of approximately 2 or 4 ounces. These are categorized as Condiment/Cooking Staples are Unranked.
- The second type of “coconut milk” is used as an alternative to dairy milk. These products are typically sold in quart or half-gallon cartons, often in the refrigerated section. The serving size is 8 ounces. These are categorized as Non-Dairy Alternatives and will be ranked based on the nutrition facts.
- The third type of coconut beverage or drink is packaged for immediate consumption in a bottle or small carton. These may be called “coconut water.” These are categorized as a Beverage and are ranked according to the nutrition facts.

Examples:

- Silk Unsweet Coconut Milk – Non-Dairy Alternative
- Vita Coco – Coconut Water – Beverage
- Thai Kitchen – Coconut Milk – Condiment/Cooking Staples

Guideline 14: Non-Nutritive Sweeteners

The term "non-nutritive sweeteners" includes all low-calorie sweeteners, artificial sweeteners, and noncaloric sweeteners. These products are called non-nutritive sweeteners because they offer no nutritional benefits such as vitamins and minerals. They may be low in calories or have no calories, depending upon the type. These products are complicated because they are used by the food industry to decrease added sugars while retaining the sweetness of a food or beverage, yet there is emerging evidence that many of these products may also be associated with negative health consequences. Because foods that are ranked "green" are nutritious foods that people should be eating more of, foods that contain non-nutritive sweeteners cannot be ranked green.

To rank foods that contain non-nutritive sweeteners, use the saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar thresholds to rank the food normally, but if it meets the criteria for green, rank it as yellow instead. As a general rule: "diet" beverages (e.g., soda, sports drinks, iced teas, etc.) that contain these non-nutritive sweeteners are automatically ranked yellow.

Examples:

- Aspartame – NutraSweet, Equal, Sugar Twin
- Sucralose – Splenda
- Steviol glycosides – Stevia
- Saccharin – Sweet'N Low, Sweet and Low, Sweet Twin
- Alitame - Aclame
- Monk Fruit

Beware – the food industry has begun adding non-nutritive sweeteners in unexpected places. Please check the ingredient list carefully, some foods may list sugar at the top and then the non-nutritive sweetener (e.g. sucralose, xylitol) appears farther down the list.

Examples of food products that may contain non-nutritive sweeteners:

- Tomato Sauce
- Peanut Butter (Go Nuts, Co., Krush Nutrition, Nuts 'N More)
- Canned Fruit
- Oatmeal
- Greek Yogurt

These guidelines were made by the Item Card Workgroup.

Chair: Marlene Schwartz

Members: Rachel Bergen, Carmen Berry, Kara Burkholder, Maisie Campbell, Kate Long, Katie Martin, Sarah McKee, Laura Ortiz, Maria Gombi Vaca, Joel Villalba, Sarah Wilson

Reviewed by: Ronli Levi and Hilary Seligman

Questions or comments? Contact marlene.schwartz@uconn.edu