

# Healthy Eating Research Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System: **Ranking Foods**

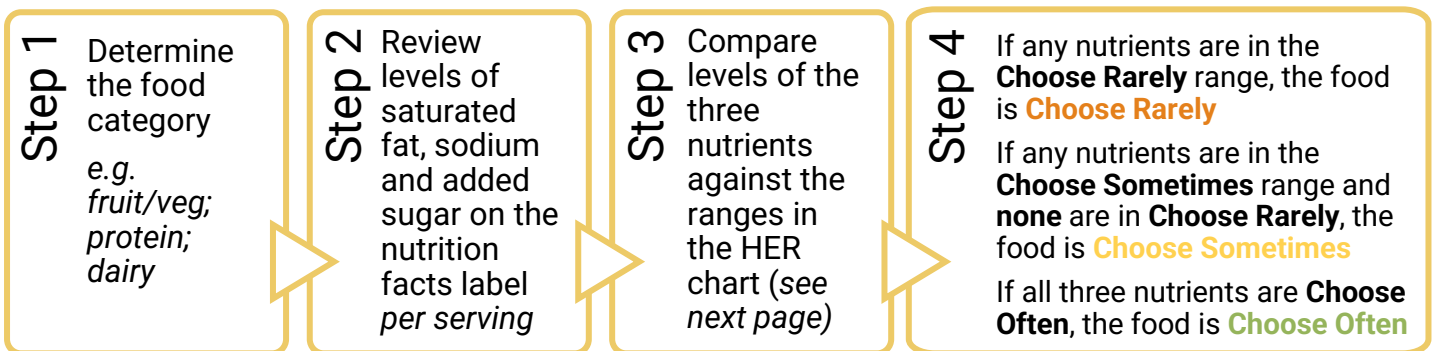


Food insecurity is a complex issue. The issues of hunger and health are closely connected, leading to a growing focus on nutrition security. People living in food insecure households face a number of barriers to eating healthy that make them vulnerable to diet-related chronic diseases, including obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease.

[The Healthy Eating Research \(HER\) Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System](#) provide clear, specific, measurable guidelines for food banks and pantries. Foods are ranked in Choose Often, Choose Sometimes or Choose Rarely based on the amounts of saturated fat, sodium and added sugar in a serving of the food.

HER Rank	What it Means	Examples
<b>GREEN – CHOOSE OFTEN</b>	Low in saturated fat, sodium and added sugar. Supports health.	Fresh produce, whole grain bread, eggs
<b>YELLOW - CHOOSE SOMETIMES</b>	Contains medium amounts of saturated fat, sodium or added sugar. Can be part of a healthy diet.	100% fruit juices, refined (non-whole) grains, peanut butter
<b>RED – CHOOSE RARELY</b>	High in saturated fat, sodium, and/or added sugar and not health promoting. A treat.	Desserts, sodas, most processed snacks
<b>NOT RANKED</b>	Foods used in small amounts to add flavor, used in scratch cooking or for specific dietary needs	Condiments, cooking staples, baby food

## Steps to Rank Foods



**Confused by Food Categories?** Review the [Guidelines to Help Categorize Foods](#)

**Grains & Grain-based Process and Packaged Snacks:** *Look at the ingredients list.* Is the first ingredient a grain? If so, is it a whole grain?

**Always use added sugar value if available. If not available, use total sugars.** For Fruits & Vegetables and Dairy, this changes the Sugar ranges

**Exceptions:** Condiments & Cooking Staples; Misc Products are **Not Ranked**

**All desserts are Choose Rarely**

**Table 1: Nutrition Guidelines for Ranking Charitable Food**

Food Category*	Example Products	Choose Often			Choose Sometimes			Choose Rarely		
		Saturated Fat	Sodium	Added Sugar**	Saturated Fat	Sodium	Added Sugar**	Saturated Fat	Sodium	Added Sugar**
Fruits and Vegetables	Fresh, canned, frozen, and dried fruits and vegetables, frozen broccoli with cheese sauce, apple sauce, tomato sauce, 100% juice, 100% fruit popsicle	≤ 2 g	≤230 mg	0 g	All 100% juice and plain dried fruit			≥2.5 g***	≥480 mg	≥12 g
					≥2.5 g***	231-479 mg	1-11 g			
Grains	Bread, rice, pasta, grains with seasoning mixes	First ingredient must be whole grain AND meet following thresholds:			≥2.5 g***	231-479 mg	7-11 g	≥2.5 g***	≥480 mg	≥12 g
		≤ 2 g	≤ 230 mg	≤ 6 g						
Protein	Animal (beef, pork, poultry, sausage, deli meats, hot dogs, eggs) and plant proteins (nuts, seeds, veggie burgers, soy, beans, peanut butter)	≤ 2 g	≤ 230 mg	≤ 6 g	2.5-4.5 g	231-479 mg	7-11 g	≥5 g	≥480 mg	≥12 g
Dairy	Milk, cheese, yogurt	≤ 3 g	≤ 230 mg	0 g	3.5-6 g	231-479 mg	1-11 g	≥6.5 g	≥480 mg	≥12 g
Non-Dairy Alternatives	All plant-based milks, yogurts and cheeses	≤ 2 g	≤ 230 mg	≤ 6 g	≥2.5 g	231-479 mg	7-11 g	≥2.5 g	≥480 mg	≥12 g
Beverages	Water, soda, coffee, tea, sports drinks, non-100% juice products	0 g	0 mg	0 g	0 g	1-140 mg	1-11 g	≥1 g	≥141 mg	≥12 g
Mixed Dishes	Frozen meals, soups, stews, macaroni and cheese	≤ 3 g	≤ 480 mg	≤ 6 g	3.5-6 g	481-599 mg	7-11 g	≥6.5 g	≥600 mg	≥12 g
Processed and Packaged Snacks	Chips (including potato, corn, and other vegetable chips), crackers, granola and other bars, popcorn	None			If a grain is the first ingredient, it must be a whole grain AND meet following thresholds:			≥2.5 g	≥141mg	≥7 g
		0-2 g	0-140 mg	0-6 g						
Desserts	Ice cream, frozen yogurt, chocolate, cookies, cakes, pastries, snack cakes, baked goods, cake mixes	None			None			All desserts		
Condiments and Cooking Staples	Spices, oil, butter, plant-based spreads, flour, salad dressing, jarred sauces (except tomato sauce), seasoning, salt, sugar	Not ranked								
Miscellaneous Products	Nutritional supplements, baby food	Not ranked								

\* Definitions of food product categories are included in the text.

\*\*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 ≤ 12 grams for the “choose often” tier, 13 to 23 grams for the “choose sometimes tier,” and ≥24 grams for the “choose rarely” tier.

\*\*\* The threshold for saturated fat is the same for the “choose sometimes” and “choose rarely” categories. All saturated fat values ≥2.5 grams should be ranked as “choose sometimes.” The overall ranking is based on the lowest tier of any nutrient. Thus, a grain with 3 grams of saturated fat (“choose sometimes”), 300 milligrams of sodium (“choose sometimes”), and 13 grams of added sugar (“choose rarely”) would fall into the “choose rarely” tier, while a grain with 3 grams of saturated fat (“choose sometimes”), 300 milligrams of sodium (“choose sometimes”), and 10 grams of added sugar (“choose sometimes”) would fall into the “choose sometimes” tier.