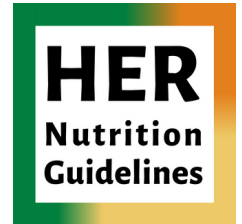


Common Challenges When Ranking

When using the Healthy Eating Research (HER) Guidelines for the Charitable Food System, some foods may be challenging to rank. This guide lists the most common confusions when ranking foods and explains how to assign the correct HER category and rank.



Here is how the guide is organized:



The foods in this guide are organized by the HER category.



For each HER category, you will see a list of foods, followed by their usual rank and an explanation about possible reasons for the confusions when ranking.



Foods with a **“Variable” rank**: This means that the food does not have a usual rank, and rank can be Chosen Often, Sometimes, or Rarely, depending on the nutrition facts label and ingredients, which may vary by brand.

1

Key Point

2

Key Point

You will see key points for each HER category. These are essential information to avoid rank confusions.

You will also see quotes from food bank staff about confusions and ranking challenges they have experienced. These quotes were collected through interviews from a research study to understand barriers to implement HER Guidelines.



FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

Food	Rank	Explanation
100% Fruit juices	Choose Sometimes	100% fruit juices have no added sugar, but because sugars found naturally in fruits are more concentrated in juices than in fresh fruits, they are ranked Choose Sometimes.
Canned, sliced, or diced fruits and vegetables	Choose Often if there are no other ingredients; Variable if there are other ingredients.	These foods usually have added ingredients (e.g., salt, sugar, syrup, oil), so their rank is variable. They can be Choose Often if no other ingredients are added.
Dried fruit, e.g.: dates, raisins, dried cranberries	Choose Sometimes , if unsweetened (no added sugar). Choose Rarely , if sweetened.	Dried fruits are not ranked Choose Often because sugars found naturally in fruits are more concentrated in dried fruits than in fresh fruits.
Fresh fruits and vegetables	Choose Often	Fresh fruits are always ranked Choose Often. They only have naturally occurring sugars.
Frozen fruits and vegetables	Choose Often , if there are no other ingredients. Variable if other ingredients are added.	If there are added ingredients (e.g., salt, sugar, syrup, oil), the rank is variable. If there are no other ingredients, they are ranked Choose Often.
Guacamole, spread or dip	Variable	Guacamole is categorized as Fruits and Vegetables, and not as a Mixed Dishes or Condiment. It has added ingredients, but it still stays in the primary food group.
Mashed potatoes	Variable	Mashed Potatoes are categorized as Fruits and Vegetables, not as Mixed Dishes. If there are multiple ingredients, categorize the food according to the primary food group instead of Mixed Dishes. Potatoes are the main ingredient in mashed potatoes; other ingredients are added for flavoring or accent (such as milk or seasoning) as part of the food preparation.
Tomato sauce	Variable	Tomato sauce with or without herbs and seasonings is categorized as Fruits and Vegetables. All other packaged pasta sauces (including tomato-based pasta sauce, dairy-based sauces, pesto and sauces including meat and vegetables) are Mixed Dishes.



"And one question that I have it was the strawberries because the strawberry has so much sugar. And I keep asking why is not Red? And finally, someone came to me: 'well, that's natural sugar'. So it's okay, it has to be green. All produce and vegetables, perishables have to be green."

Warehouse Inventory Manager

Key Points for Fruits and Vegetables

- 1** Identify descriptions in the product label that helps with determining the rank, such as "no added sugar", "unsweetened", "low sodium", "no salt"
- 2** 100% juices are not ranked Choose Often; they are ranked Choose Sometimes and have no added sugar
- 3** Low-sodium cans of vegetables that do not contain any other ingredient are likely to be Choose Often. Otherwise, their rank is variable
- 4** Some canned vegetables (especially corn) and tomato sauces have added sugars as well
- 5** For packaged Fruits and Vegetables, when added sugar information is not available on the nutrition facts label, total sugars are used to determine a rank. There is a higher total sugar threshold because of it combines added sugar and naturally occurring sugars

GRAINS

Food	Rank	Explanation
Cereal, granola	Variable	Cereal and granola in any packaging size are categorized as Grains. However, cereal bars and granola bars are categorized as Processed and Packaged Snacks.
Dough: pizza, bread	Variable	The final product is categorized as Grain. Dough is categorized into the food group of their final product. These items are not considered cooking staples.
Mixes: pancake, muffin, biscuit, bread, pizza	Variable	The final product is categorized as Grain. Mixes are categorized into the food group of their final product. These items are not considered cooking staples.
Muffin, scone, pancake	Variable	They are categorized as Grains and not as Desserts.
Stuffing	Variable	Stuffing is categorized as Grains and not as Condiments because it can be eaten on its own.
White/yellow dry or fresh pasta, rice, grits, couscous	Choose Sometimes if plain; Variable with seasoning or flavors are added	Because the first ingredient is not a whole grain, they cannot be ranked Choose Often. If made with other ingredients (seasoning), rank is variable.
Whole-grain dry or fresh pasta, brown rice, oats, quinoa	Choose Often if plain; Variable with seasoning or flavors are added	Because the first ingredient is a whole grain, they can be ranked Choose Often. If made with other ingredients (seasoning), rank is variable.

Key Points for Grains

1 Judge a baking mix and a dough by their final form, which is a grain for non-dessert baked goods such as muffins, scones, pancakes, etc

2 Check if the first ingredient is a whole grain

PROTEIN

Food	Rank	Explanation
Eggs, fresh	Choose Often	Fresh eggs are categorized as Protein and not as Dairy. They are always ranked Choose Often.
Ground beef 80% lean	Choose Rarely	Ground beef with specified labels (such as 80% lean/20% fat or 90% lean/10% fat) will have a standardized saturated fat content per serving.
Ground beef 90% or more lean	Choose Sometimes	Ground beef with specified labels (such as 80% lean/20% fat or 90% lean/10% fat) will have a standardized saturated fat content per serving.
Peanut butter Almond butter Sunflower butter Other nut butter	Variable	Peanut butter and other nut butter spreads are categorized as Protein and not as Condiments.

Key Point for Proteins

- 1 The ranking for meats are generally determined by their saturated fat content
- 2 The ranking for canned beans are generally determined by the sodium content. Low sodium canned beans are likely Choose Often

DAIRY

Food	Rank	Explanation
Milk: reduced fat, 1%, 2%, skim, nonfat, or fat-free	Choose Often , if plain. Variable , if sweetened.	These milk types have less than 2 g of saturated fat per serving and are ranked Choose Often if they are made with no other ingredients.
Whole milk	Choose Sometimes , if plain. Choose Sometimes or Choose Rarely , if sweetened.	Milk has specified labels to identify the saturated fat content per serving. The whole milk has more than 2 g of saturated fat per serving and is ranked Choose Sometimes if made with no other ingredients.
Yogurt	Variable	Yogurt's saturated fat content is variable, and they usually have sweeteners. Look at the ingredient list to check for diet sweeteners: if they are present, their rank is variable but cannot be Choose Often.

Key Points for Dairy

- 1 The fat content in plain milk defines its rank. If milk is made with flavoring and added sugars, the rank will be variable
- 2 Always check Dairy products' ingredient list for diet sweeteners: if they are present, their rank is variable but not Choose Often
- 3 For Dairy products, when added sugar information is not available on the nutrition facts label, total sugars are used to determine a rank. There is a higher total sugar threshold because it combines added sugar and naturally occurring sugars

NON-DAIRY ALTERNATIVES

Food	Rank	Explanation
Almond milk Oat milk Soy milk Other nut/plant-based milk	Variable	These items are categorized as Non-Dairy Alternative and not as Beverages.

BEVERAGES

Food	Rank	Explanation
Coffee drinks Tea drinks (prepared beverages)	Variable	Prepared or ready-to-drink coffee and tea drinks are categorized as Beverages. Their rank is variable because they are usually made with other ingredients (e.g., milk, cream) and added sugar.
Dry drink mixes Dry fruit or shake drink mixes	Variable	Dry drink mixes are categorized as Beverages and not as Miscellaneous. However, if a dry mix is a nutritional or protein powder, it is categorized as Miscellaneous.
Fruit drinks or juice drinks	Variable	Fruit drinks or juice drinks are not 100% juice and are categorized as Beverages. 100% Juices are Fruits and Vegetables and are always ranked Choose Sometimes.
Liquid water enhancers	Variable	Categorized as Beverages and not as Condiments.
Tea, bag or loose, unsweetened Ground or whole bean coffee	Likely Choose Often	Tea bags and ground coffee are categorized as Beverages and not as Miscellaneous. They will be Choose Often if they are made with no added sugars.
Water (plain, sparkling)	Choose Often; Variable (if sodium or sweetener is added)	Water is categorized as a Beverage. It is not categorized as Miscellaneous.

Key Points for Beverages

- 1** Beverages that are dry or powder mixes are categorized as Beverages (and not as Miscellaneous). Examples: ground coffee, drink mix, chocolate mix, hot cocoa mix, tea bags
- 2** Only 100% juices are categorized as Fruits and Vegetables, not as Beverages. All other fruit drinks and beverages are ranked as Beverages
- 3** Always check Beverages products' ingredient list for diet sweeteners: if they are present, their rank is variable but not Choose Often

MIXED DISHES

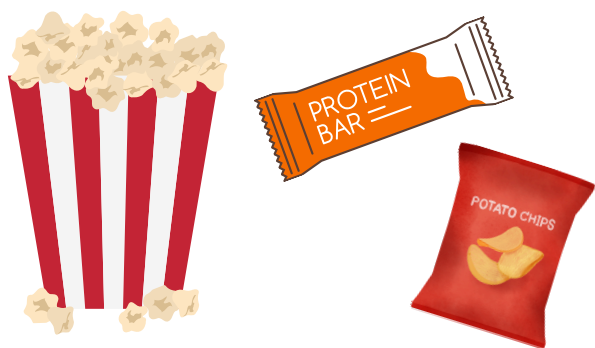
Food	Rank	Explanation
Dry soup mix	Variable	Dry soup mix is categorized as a Mixed Dishes and not as Condiments.
Mac and cheese	Variable	Mac and cheese is categorized as Mixed Dishes, not as Grain because the two primary ingredients are from different categories. Look at the information in the “as packaged” column of the nutritional facts label to rank.
Pizza rolls	Variable	These are Mixed Dishes, even if they are in a one-portion package. They are not ranked as Processed and Packaged Snacks.
Sauces: pasta, Alfredo, creamy rosa, spaghetti	Variable	All packaged pasta sauces are Mixed Dishes. Plain tomato sauce is an exception, and it is categorized as Fruits and Vegetables.

Key Points for Mixed Dishes

- 1 Meal kits that combine individual products in different categories (e.g., meal kit: cereal and yogurt) are ranked as Assorted Not Ranked and not as Mixed Dishes. Mixed Dishes are products that contain more than one category of food mixed together (e.g., lasagna, mac and cheese)
- 2 Mixed Dishes products in a “one-serving” (i.e., individual packaging) are still considered Mixed Dishes and not Processed and Packaged Snacks
- 3 Sauces consumed with cooked dishes (e.g., pasta, meats) are categorized as Mixed Dishes. Sauces that are used in small amounts and add flavor to a prepared dish or food (e.g., hot sauce, barbeque sauce) are categorized as Condiments

PROCESSED AND PACKAGED SNACKS

Food	Rank	Explanation
Popcorn	Choose Sometimes or Choose Rarely	It's a whole grain-based snack, usually containing added oil and salt.
Cereal bar Granola bar Protein bar	Likely Choose Rarely ; it could be ranked Choose Sometimes if the first ingredient is a whole-grain AND it meets the nutrient limits.	Look for the word "bar" in the name of these products to categorize them as Processed and Packaged Snacks and not as Grains.



"I think it's just making sure that when we're ranking, you know, we're ranking it under the right category...But I do notice some inconsistencies with like labeling, or categorizing products as snacks versus grains."
Nutrition Education Supervisor

Key Points for Processed and Packaged Snacks

- 1 Processed and Packaged Snacks are never ranked Choose Often. They can be Choose Sometimes if they are a whole-grain snack (e.g., whole-grain cracker, popcorn) or a non-grain snack (e.g., potato chips) and meet the sodium, fat, and added sugar limits
- 2 Most snacks will be ranked Choose Rarely
- 3 Kid-themed snacks, such as Goldfish crackers, are still ranked as Processed and Packaged Snacks and not as Miscellaneous, Baby Food
- 4 Grain-based foods such as cereal bars and crackers, are not Grains because they are consumed between meals. These are ranked as Packaged Snacks

DESSERTS

Food	Rank	Explanation
Dough: cookie, pastry, cake	Choose Rarely	The final product is a dessert.
Mixes: cake, cookie, brownie	Choose Rarely	The final product is a dessert.

Key Points for Desserts

1

Judge a baking mix and a dough by their final form

2

Muffins are not considered desserts, but cookies, brownies, and cakes are

CONDIMENTS AND COOKING STAPLES

Food	Rank	Explanation
Flours: all purpose, corn masa, whole wheat flour, rice flour, almond flour	Unranked	All flours are categorized as Condiments and Cooking Staples and not as Grains. They are a single ingredient and not something typically eaten on their own.
Coffee creamer, half-and-half	Unranked	These are categorized as Condiments and Cooking Staples and not as Dairy. They are used in small amounts or to prepare foods and are not consumed on their own.
Condensed milk		
Heavy cream, light cream, whipping cream, whipped cream		
Icing, frosting, filling		

Continued

CONDIMENTS AND COOKING STAPLES

Food	Rank	Explanation
Broth	Unranked	These are categorized as Condiments and Cooking Staples because they are used in small amounts when consuming or preparing foods and are not eaten on their own.
Butter, margarine		
Coconut milk		
Dressings		
Jelly		
Ketchup, mustard, canned salsa, mayo		
Pancake syrup, honey		
Pickles, pickled vegetables, olives		
Sauces: cranberry, barbeque, hot, lemon, teriyaki, cilantro lime, soy, sloppy joe, enchilada, tartar, green peppercorn		
Seasoning mixes		
Sweeteners		

Key Points for Condiments and Cooking Staples

1 Generally, the spreads are ranked based on the main ingredient category. For example, hazelnut spread is categorized as Protein, while cheese dip is Dairy. However, jelly and butter are exceptions and are classified as condiments

2 Sauces used in small amounts (e.g., 1 tbsp) are categorized as Condiments and Cooking Staples. If they are used in large amounts (e.g., 1/2 cup for pasta dishes), they are categorized as Mixed Dishes. Tomato sauce with no other ingredients is an exception and is categorized as Fruits and Vegetables

MISCELLANEOUS

Food	Rank	Explanation
Baby or toddler food Baby or toddler formula	Unranked	Babies' and toddlers' foods and formulas are designed to meet their specific nutritional needs.
Nutritional, protein, diabetes care powder or mix Functional drinks powder or mix	Unranked	Dry mixes intended for specific nutritional needs are ranked as Miscellaneous and not as Beverages. Look for the words nutritional, protein, diabetes, and functional to identify these products.
Perishable prepared food	Unranked	Prepared perishable foods are Miscellaneous. Frozen meals are categorized by the main food group, or as Mixed Dishes.

ASSORTED

Food	Rank	Explanation
Assorted refrigerated foods	Assorted Not Ranked	Assorted boxes may have products from the same food category or a combination of products from different food categories. Ranking all the products in an assorted box is impracticable for most food banks.
Assorted beverage		
Backpack bag		
Meal kit: cereal & juice		
Disaster box		
Donated box		
Food drive box		
Meal box, shelf stable		
Milk, assorted flavors		
Unsorted meat		
Youth Program milk		

Key Points for Assorted

1

Rank food identified as mixed, assorted, salvage, disaster boxes, or meal boxes for programs (e.g., "Family Meal Box") as Assorted Not Ranked if they do not have a consistent rank

2

It is better to assign a rank to these items than to leave their rank blank, so they can be correctly identified when creating inventory reports

NON-FOODS

Food	Rank	Explanation
Paper products	Non-food Not Ranked	These items are not food; there is no nutritional value to assess.
Cleaning products		
Laundry detergent		
Pet food		

Key Points for Non-foods

- 1 Non-food includes health and beauty care products, household cleaners, paper products, pet foods, and pet care products
- 2 It is better to assign a rank to these items than to leave their rank blank, so they can be correctly identified when creating inventory reports