

Universal Meals: Food Everyone Can Enjoy

Universal Meals by PCRM promote social justice, allergen safety and cultural sensitivity

More people than ever are changing the way they eat—for health reasons, environmental or humane concerns, or other motivations. Many more have followed cultural or religious food traditions all their lives.

- Some people avoid beef or pork for religious reasons.
- Many people nowadays are going vegan—avoiding animal products altogether.
- Many are lactose intolerant and avoid dairy products.
- Because of allergies or sensitivities, some people avoid peanuts, gluten, and other foods.

They take their preferences or directives with them when they board a plane, go to a business meeting, visit the breakfast bar at a hotel, have lunch in the company cafeteria, or meet friends at a restaurant. It is challenging for them if their nutritional preferences are not reflected in anything that is served. And it is no less challenging for businesses that want to be able to respond to clients' requests.

Universal Meals is a simple set of meal guidelines that meet the vast majority of food requirements and can be implemented anywhere food is served. Imagine being lactose intolerant, following a vegan diet, or avoiding meat and eggs for religious reasons, and never again having to ask if suitable foods would be available—because they always are? Imagine being a flight attendant who never again has to say, "I'm sorry, if you wanted a vegan meal, you would have had to order it 48 hours in advance." Universal Meals means never having to say you're sorry.

Developing Guidelines for Universal Meals

Natural constituencies include the following:

Jewish: No pork or shellfish, avoid mixing meat and dairy in a meal

Muslim: No pork or alcohol

Hindu: No beef; most avoid meat and eggs

Ethiopian Orthodox Christians: No animal products two days each week and during Lent

Vegetarian: No meat

Vegan: No animal products

Many people of color: Avoid lactose

Gluten-free: No wheat, rye, barley

Individuals with severe allergies: Avoid common allergens

Foods that are likely to work well include vegetables, fruits, legumes, and non-gluten grains (e.g., rice, corn, quinoa, etc.) While it is not possible to cover *every* possible food tradition, preference, or medical need, it is relatively straightforward to cover the vast majority of them.

The Defense Department's Experience

The Defense Logistics Agency of the U.S. Department of Defense developed a meal program that, while intended for a more limited application, provides useful lessons. The Humanitarian Daily Ration (HDR) was designed for feeding large populations of displaced persons in emergencies (<http://www.dla.mil/TroopSupport/Subsistence/Operational-rations/hdr/>). It provides a full day's nutrition and is designed with the recipients' needs in mind:

“In order to provide the widest possible acceptance from the variety of potential consumers with diverse religious and dietary restrictions from around the world, the HDR contains no animal products or animal by-products, except that minimal amounts of dairy products are permitted. Alcohol and alcohol based ingredients are also banned.”

These meals are much more basic than Universal Meals. HDRs are inexpensive and are packaged to be able to withstand extreme environmental conditions, with a three-year shelf life at 80 degrees Fahrenheit, and to allow air drops when necessary. Examples of currently available HDRs include the following, served as fully prepared, ready-to-eat meals, along with crackers, peanut butter, raisins, bread, a fruit bar, etc.

Bean Salad

Brown and Wild Rice with Lentils

Barley Stew

Lentil Stew

Beans and Rice in Tomato Sauce

Red Beans and Rice

Pasta in Tomato Sauce

Beans with Potatoes

Lentils and Vegetables

Although Universal Meals aim to be enticing to all diners and are not necessarily designed to withstand the rigors of emergency situations, what is noteworthy in the HDR program is the U.S. Government's recognition of the need for widely acceptable meals, a principle that might

be profitably applied to all facilities serving diverse populations. Also noteworthy is the use of simple plant-based ingredients, focusing especially on grains, legumes, and vegetables.

Limitations of Universal Meals

Universal Meals ensure that the nutritional requirements of the vast majority of people are met where they work, study, or travel. However, the program has limitations. For example:

- a. Some individuals have unusual food allergies. A list of food allergens is available at http://www.foodallergens.info/Allergenic_Foods/Allergy_Foods.html
- b. Meals will be kosher or halal only when catering companies have made the necessary arrangements.
- c. The range of religious observances is broad and may include practices that are not accounted for by Universal Meals.

Building a Program of Universal Meals

A successful program will require several steps:

1. Preparation of draft menu guidelines.
2. Development of practical and enticing food examples. Sensory and psychological appeal will be as important as nutritional content.
3. Identification of settings where this program would be most helpful, such as airlines and airline clubs, hotel breakfast bars, schools, college food services, businesses, and restaurants, and identification of the types of foods that are suitable for each, given their physical constraints. For example, the foods that will work best for a hotel breakfast bar which has abundant horizontal space will be different from those that work in flight where meals are distributed from a cart in the aisle.
4. Contacting potential allies and knowledgeable individuals for their advice and support.
 - a. Advocates for those who need to avoid gluten and allergens.
 - b. Religious experts to lend advice and support and to build bridges with other leaders.
 - c. Culinary experts to lend their names and expertise, and provide guidance in developing the most attractive and practical food items.
 - d. Caterers to anticipate advantages and obstacles.
 - e. Press to promote the concept.

5. Developing working relationships with businesses, schools, and food production companies whose support would be helpful.
6. Building a promotional plan, including naming, outreach, and educational materials.

Appendix A. Suggested Criteria for Universal Meals

General Principles

1. **Acceptability.** Appealing to people with a variety of dietary needs and traditions, and containing no offensive ingredients (e.g. “a little meat stock,” “a trace of peanuts,” etc.)
2. **Familiarity.** Tried and true foods that have long been popular (e.g., breakfast oats, hummus, rice pilaf, etc.)
3. **Flexibility.** Can be tailored and enhanced as desired (e.g., garlic hummus with roasted red peppers, rice pilaf with asparagus, bean tacos with salsa Mexicana.)
4. **School-friendly.** Meets school nutrition guidelines.
5. **Adaptability.** Resilient enough to work in institutional settings (e.g., schools, airlines)
6. **Short-term.** Designed for short-term use and not necessarily intended as optimal nutrition for extended periods. For example, recipes need not be low-sodium, nutritionally complete, vitamin B₁₂-fortified, etc.

Suggested Criteria

1. **Include:**
 - a. Vegetables
 - b. Fruits
 - c. Legumes
 - d. Non-gluten grains
 - e. Flavorings (herbs, spices, and other flavorings)
2. **Omit:**
 - a. Animal-derived ingredients
 - b. Gluten-containing grains (wheat, barley, rye, triticale, and contaminated grains)

- c. Common allergens: a and b (above), plus peanuts, tree nuts, soy, mustard, sesame, celery, lupin, and sulphites
- d. Alcohol

Appendix B. Applicable Settings

Airlines. Meals served on trays, snack boxes.

Example: In-flight announcement: “Your meal selections on today’s flight include Roast Beef or Wild Mushroom Ravioli. The ravioli dinner meets the new UM criteria. More information is in the card in the seatback pocket.”

Airline clubs. Buffet style soups, salads, and light meals.

Example: The club buffet features two soups, one of which is Vegan Minestrone. Also served are a Quinoa Salad, Roasted Red Pepper Hummus, and Spinach Salad, all of which are marked with a “UM” logo.

Hotel breakfast bars. Buffet-style simple foods.

Example: A hotel breakfast buffet includes oatmeal with raisins and cinnamon, marked with a “UM” logo. The buffet also has breakfast potatoes, bananas, beans, oranges, and gluten-free bread for toasting, all similarly marked.

Restaurants. Menu service.

Example: Under “Soups,” the menu lists Tuscan Lentil Soup, Tomato Bisque, and Roasted Corn Chowder. Under “Main Dishes,” the menu lists Spinach Lasagna al Forno. Under “Desserts,” the menu lists Chocolate Pudding. All are marked with the “UM” logo.

Schools. Buffet-style or cafeteria-style full-meal service.

Example: A school district finds that its population is more diverse every year. Many students request vegan meals and an increasing number come from Hindu, Muslim, or other traditions. In the cafeteria line, Vegan Chili with gluten-free crackers and a Black Bean Burger on gluten-free bun are marked with the “UM” logo.

College food services. Buffet-style or cafeteria-style full-meal service.

Example: A college student who started a vegan diet in high school is thrilled to find many choices that fit her needs, including pizza and desserts. The cafeteria uses UM meals to illustrate cultural choices from around the world.

Businesses. Buffet-style or cafeteria-style full-meal service.

Example: The cafeteria features an oatmeal bar at breakfast and has many UM dishes in the hot food line. The CEO and Human Resources Director have been getting compliments on how the program promotes employee wellness.

Appendix C. Meal Examples

Note: Items including grains (e.g., noodles, bread, or pizza crust) will use gluten-free varieties.

Soups

- Lentil soup
- Tomato bisque
- Split pea soup
- Minestrone

Salads

- Mixed greens
- Baby spinach with onions and tomatoes
- Chickpea salad
- Four-bean salad

Mains

- Spaghetti Arrabbiata
- Veggie artichoke pizza
- Ravioli with wild mushrooms
- Spinach lasagna

- Potato enchilada with salsa Mexicana
- Veggie fajitas on wild rice
- Bean burritos and bean tacos

- Stuffed pepper with rice and lentils
- Mixed vegetable curry
- Peas, cauliflower and potato curry
- Szechuan vegetables and rice noodles

Cucumber and asparagus sushi with tamari

Vegetable plate (sweet potatoes, corn, pureed greens, tomatoes)

Sandwiches

Hummus sandwich (without sesame)

Veggie burger

Grains

Rice, wild rice, corn, quinoa

Vegetables

All

Desserts

Raspberry brownies

Chocolate cookies

Chocolate pudding

Mangos, blueberries, and bananas

Vanilla sorbet

Sliced oranges

Poached pears

Popular Cuisines

The most popular cuisines served at U.S. restaurants are Italian, Mexican, and Chinese, according to Nation's Restaurant News and the National Restaurant Association. Among young (25-34 year old) diners, sushi and fusion restaurants are also popular.

(<http://www.nrn.com/consumer-trends/top-10-ethnic-cuisines-consumers-favor>;

<http://www.restaurant.org/Pressroom/Press-Releases/New-Research-Finds-Americans-are-Embracing-Global>).

Appendix D. Food Allergens

In the U.S., the [Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004 \(FALCPA\)](#) holds that approximately two percent of adults and five percent of young children in the U.S. have food allergies and that eight foods account for approximately 90 percent of these allergies:

1. Milk
2. Eggs
3. Fish (e.g., bass, flounder, cod)
4. Crustacean shellfish (e.g. crab, lobster, shrimp)
5. Tree nuts (e.g., almonds, walnuts, pecans)
6. Peanuts
7. Wheat
8. Soybeans

Pursuant to this Act, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration requires that these potential allergens be listed on product labels.

(<https://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/FoodAllergens/ucm530854.htm>)

Canada and the United Kingdom have similar lists

(<http://www.inspection.gc.ca/food/information-for-consumers/fact-sheets-and-infographics/food-allergies/eng/1332442914456/1332442980290>;

<https://www.allergyuk.org/information-and-advice/conditions-and-symptoms/36-food-allergy>),

but add mustard, sesame, sulphites, triticale (pronounced trit uh KAY lee, a wheat-rye hybrid), and lupin (a bean sometimes added to flour products or eaten pickled).

Appendix E. Interested Groups

The following figures provide estimates of affected groups in the US:

Vegetarian or vegan	5% - 10%, depending on age
Partial vegetarian	15%
Gluten intolerant or sensitive, or celiac	10%
Jewish, Muslim, or Hindu	4%
Lactose Intolerant	10% - 90%, depending on race and age
Severe food allergies	5% of US children

Appendix F. Brief Description for Use in Menus

More people than ever are changing the way they eat—for health reasons, environmental or humane concerns, religious observances, or other motivations. We are pleased to offer *Universal Meals*—delicious meals that contain no animal-derived ingredients, gluten, alcohol, or common allergens (dairy, egg, peanuts, tree nuts, soy, mustard, sesame, celery, lupin, and sulphites). You'll find them marked with the UM logo.