

JAPANESE SCHOOL LUNCH

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SCHOOL LUNCH The Japanese school lunch program was begun in 1947, just after the Second World War, with the purpose of improving the nutritional status of children. The School Meal Law was enacted in 1954 and elementary school and junior high schools then started the school lunch program. Meal service is for lunch only. In 1997, there were 24,300 elementary schools in Japan and 98% of them provided school lunch (full lunch 95.7%, light meal 0.6%, and milk only 1.7%). There were 11,300 junior high schools and 84.7% provided school lunch (full lunch 69.9%, light meal 0.7%, and milk only 14.1%). Lunch is prepared at each school (50.7% of primary schools and 32.8% of junior high schools) or in a central kitchen covering several schools within the same area. Each school or central kitchen has at least one dietitian.

MENU School lunch supplies about 1/3 of the DRI for energy and selected nutrients. Some nutrients are supplied in excess of 1/3, depending upon the difficulty in satisfying the RDA. For example, school lunch supplies about half the RDA for Ca. The menu changes daily. Fast foods are seldom used and soft drinks are not available at school lunch or in the schools. The cost of each lunch is about 2 US dollars, covering only the cost for food, materials, water and gas. The charge is generally paid by the children's parents or guardians. Costs for the workers and the facilities are paid by the central and local governments.

SANITATION Dietitians have been very careful about sanitation. However, in 1996, about 10,000 children were infected by enteropathogenic *E. Coli* (O157) and 12 children died. Finding the causative foods is often very difficult. Most kitchens providing school lunch now usually utilize the HACCP system.

STATUS OF SCHOOL DIETITIAN When the Japanese economy improved to the point of being able to supply sufficient food for the nation in the 1970's, many people wanted to eliminate the school lunch program. However, this movement did not last long. Because of the increase in sedentary workplace occupations, the decrease in recreational physical activity, and the increase in availability of food, the prevalence of obesity, hyperlipidemia, diabetes and other life-style related diseases increased. At the same time, parents spent more time at work and were able to devote less time to preparing meals. About 10% of children come to school without breakfast. Furthermore, thinness has become fashionable among young people, including school children, and many of them are on improper diets. In this situation, the school lunch program has again been recognized as an important source of nutrition for these children. School lunch is very popular with children because they generally enjoy the taste of the food as well as the time spent with friends. It is also popular with parents because of the reliable nutritional value of the lunch, the safety and sanitation observed, and the time-saving benefits to parents. As a result, school dietitians have obtained prestige in society.

SCHOOL LUNCH FOR EDUCATION At first, the school lunch program was started for the purpose of supplying nutrients to children. In 1989, it became a part of the educational curriculum, used to teach children new dietary habits. For example, they learn that low-salt meals are more delicious and healthier than the high-salt meals they usually encounter at home and in many restaurants. Some may learn that fish and vegetables, which they did not consider appetizing, are actually quite tasty. School lunch is an excellent educational tool not only to teach about nutrition but about food production, agriculture, and food distribution. School lunch can be a powerful tool for good communication at various events, not only within the school but also in the community. We Japanese dietitians are proud of our school lunch program.

DIETETICS TEACHER The establishment of the position of dietetics teacher in Japanese schools has been studied for about two years by an expert committee of the Japanese Ministry of Education and Science. Under a new regulation, the school dietitian will officially become the school's teacher of dietetics. The final report of the committee was submitted to the Central Council of Education in the ministry (Feb.13, 2003). This indicates the high value and promotion of the school dietitian by the government and the nation.