



United States Department of Agriculture

What are Staple Foods?

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Staple Foods Overview

Retail food stores must meet [Criterion A or Criterion B staple food requirements](https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailer-eligibility-clarification-of-criterion) (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailer-eligibility-clarification-of-criterion>) in order to be eligible to participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). **Staple foods** are the basic foods that make up a significant portion of a person's diet and are usually prepared at home and eaten as a meal. Staple foods do not include [prepared foods, heated foods](https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap-retail-merchants/retailer-eligibility-prepared-foods-and-heated-foods) (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap-retail-merchants/retailer-eligibility-prepared-foods-and-heated-foods>), or [accessory foods](https://www.fns.usda.gov/retailer-eligibility-accessory-foods-store-eligibility-determinations) (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/retailer-eligibility-accessory-foods-store-eligibility-determinations>). The four **staple food categories** include:

1. Fruits or vegetables;
2. Meat, poultry, or fish;
3. Dairy products; and
4. Breads or cereals.

Staple food varieties¹ are different types of food within a staple food category. Included below are lists of acceptable staple food varieties in the four staple food categories, which can be used to determine whether or not a food item is a staple food for purposes of SNAP

¹ Please note that changes to the definition of "variety" were codified in SNAP regulations through the final rule titled "[Enhancing Retailer Standards in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-12-15/pdf/2016-29837.pdf)." (<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-12-15/pdf/2016-29837.pdf>) However, Sec. 765 of the [Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2017](https://www.congress.gov/115/bills/hr244/BILLS-115hr244enr.pdf) (<https://www.congress.gov/115/bills/hr244/BILLS-115hr244enr.pdf>), enacted after the date of publication of the final rule, provides that FNS apply the requirements regarding acceptable staple food varieties that were in effect on the day before the date of the enactment of the Agricultural Act of 2014 (the 2014 Farm Bill). This document reflects the definition of "variety" in place on February 6, 2014.

retailer eligibility. The lists also indicate which food items are considered to be **perishable staple food varieties**, which are either frozen staple food items or fresh, unrefrigerated, or refrigerated staple food items that would spoil or suffer significant deterioration in quality within 2-3 weeks at room temperature. Please note that a shelf-stable food item that does not require refrigeration until *after* it is opened is not a perishable food.

Also included below is an illustrative list of examples of staple food **stocking units**. A stocking unit is a can, bunch, box, bag, or package in which a product is usually sold.

The lists of examples that follow are intended to be *illustrative* and provide guidance, and should not be construed as an exhaustive list of staple food varieties or staple food stocking units.

Examples of Staple Food Varieties

The Vegetables or Fruits Staple Food Category: Examples of Staple Food Varieties

In the vegetables or fruits staple food category, “variety” is generally defined by product kind or main ingredient. This means that apples, bananas, and lettuce each represent discrete varieties. This also means that 100% apple juice and applesauce are not each considered discrete varieties, as they are both considered apples. For multiple-ingredient food products, the first ingredient determines variety; a can of ravioli with tomato sauce listed as the first ingredient would constitute a variety in the vegetables or fruits staple food category (i.e., tomato).

What follows is an illustrative, but not exhaustive, list of eight acceptable varieties in the vegetables or fruits staple food category. Within each variety are two different examples of food items for that variety. The multiple-ingredient food item examples in this list would be acceptable only if the main ingredient is in the vegetables or fruits staple category.

Perishable foods are indicated with an asterisk (*).

Vegetables or Fruits Examples:

1. Potatoes (potatoes* or frozen tater tots*)
2. Oranges (100% orange juice* or fresh oranges*)
3. Tomatoes (canned tomato soup or sun dried tomatoes)
4. Apples (dried apples or pre-cut apple go-packs*)
5. Pumpkin (canned pumpkin or fresh whole pumpkin)
6. Bananas (fresh bananas* or frozen bananas*)
7. Lettuce (fresh head of iceberg lettuce* or pre-cut and bagged romaine lettuce*)
8. Pineapples (canned pineapple rings or fresh whole pineapple*)

The Meat, Poultry, or Fish Staple Food Category: Examples of Staple Food Varieties

In the meat, poultry, or fish staple food category, “variety” is generally defined by product kind or main ingredient. This means that chicken, pork, and beef each represent discrete varieties. This also means that beefsteak and ground beef are not each considered discrete varieties, as they are both considered beef. For multiple-ingredient food products, the first ingredient determines variety. For example, a can of beef stew with beef listed as the first ingredient would constitute a variety in the meat, poultry, or fish staple food category (i.e., beef).

What follows is an illustrative, but not exhaustive, list of eight acceptable varieties in this staple food category. Within each variety are two different examples of food items for that variety. The examples of multiple ingredient food items in this list would be acceptable only if the listed main ingredient would be considered a variety in the meat, poultry, or fish staple category. Perishable foods are indicated with an asterisk (*).

Meat, Poultry, or Fish Examples:

1. Turkey (e.g., fresh deli-sliced turkey* or fresh ground turkey*)
2. Chicken (e.g., fresh chicken cutlets* or frozen chicken nuggets*)
3. Beef (e.g., fresh ground beef* or beef jerky)
4. Tuna (e.g., fresh albacore tuna steak* or canned albacore tuna fish)
5. Catfish (e.g., frozen catfish filet* or smoked packaged catfish)
6. Lamb/Mutton (e.g., fresh lamb chops* or fresh ground lamb*)
7. Pork (e.g., pork loin* or fresh sliced ham*)
8. Chicken eggs (e.g., fresh chicken eggs* or liquid chicken egg whites*)

The Dairy Products Staple Food Category: Examples of Staple Food Varieties

In the dairy products staple food category, “variety” is generally defined by product kind or main ingredient. This means that yogurt, cheese, and milk each represent discrete varieties. This also means that Swiss cheese and cheddar cheese are not each considered discrete varieties, as they are both considered cheese. Plant-based dairy products are also considered a variety in the dairy products staple food category based on their main ingredient and the traditional dairy product for which they are a substitute. For multiple-ingredient food products, the first ingredient determines the variety such that a jar of Alfredo sauce with milk listed as the first ingredient would constitute a variety in the dairy products staple food category (i.e., milk). Exceptions to this include plant-based dairy products, butter substitutes, and infant formula, which are considered staple food varieties in the dairy products category even though the first listed ingredient of those products is not always dairy-based.

What follows is an illustrative, but not exhaustive, list of nine acceptable varieties in the dairy products staple food category. Within each variety are two different examples of food items for that variety. The multiple ingredient food item examples in this list would be acceptable only if the main ingredient is in the dairy products staple category (with the exceptions of plant-based milked alternatives, butter substitutes, and infant formula). Perishable foods are indicated with an asterisk (*).

Dairy Products Examples:

1. Cheese (e.g., fresh deli sliced cheddar cheese* or packaged grated parmesan cheese)
2. Milk (e.g., skim milk* or whole milk*)
3. Almond-based milk (e.g., refrigerated almond milk* or shelf-stable almond milk)
4. Butter (e.g., frozen sweet cream butter* or fresh salted butter*)
5. Butter substitute (e.g., margarine* or non-dairy spread*)
6. Sour cream (e.g., fresh, lite sour cream* or fresh, organic sour cream*)
7. Yogurt (e.g., fresh whole milk French vanilla yogurt* or fresh nonfat peach yogurt*)
8. Infant formula (e.g., liquid, ready-to-feed formula or powdered milk formula)
9. Soy infant formula (e.g., liquid, ready-to-feed formula or powdered soy formula)

The Bread or Cereals Staple Food Category: Examples of Staple Food Varieties

In the bread or cereals staple food category, “variety” is generally defined by product kind or main ingredient. This means that buns/rolls, bread, and pitas each represent discrete varieties. This also means that hotdog buns and hamburger buns are not each considered discrete varieties, as they are both considered buns/rolls. For multiple-ingredient food products, the first ingredient determines variety such that a frozen chicken pot pie with wheat flour listed as the first ingredient would constitute a variety in the bread or cereals staple food category (i.e., wheat).

What follows is an illustrative, but not exhaustive, list of nine acceptable varieties in the breads or cereals staple food category. Within each variety are two different examples of food items for that variety. The multi-ingredient food examples in this list would be acceptable only if the main ingredient is in the bread or cereal staple category. Perishable foods are indicated with an asterisk (*).

Bread or Cereals Examples:

1. Bread (e.g., a loaf of rye bread* or a loaf of multigrain bread*)
2. Pasta (e.g., gluten-free spaghetti or whole wheat rotini)
3. Tortillas (e.g., corn tortillas* or flour tortillas*)
4. Bagels (e.g., poppy seed bagels* or plain bagels*)
5. Pitas (e.g., low-carb pita* or whole wheat pita*)
6. Cold breakfast cereal (e.g., rice-based cereal or oat-based cereal)
7. Buns/rolls (e.g., frozen dinner rolls* or hot dog buns*)
8. Infant cereal (e.g., wheat-based infant cereal or oat-based infant cereal)
9. Rice (e.g., a bag of rice or a rice-based frozen meal*)

Examples of Staple Food Stocking Units

Stocking units are a can, bunch, box, bag, or package in which a product is usually sold. This list of examples serves to define “stocking unit” for the purposes of Criterion A eligibility. If a food item would not usually be sold individually, then it does not individually constitute a stocking unit. Such food items are usually sold in bunches, boxes, bags, or packages with a number of other identical items (e.g., a loaf of bread, a bunch of grapes, a carton of eggs, a bag of rice, or a package of sliced turkey). The individual sale of such food items would be impractical, given their small individual size. For such products, it is the bunch, box, bag, or package that represents one stocking unit. What follows is an illustrative, but not exhaustive, list of such products and their standard stocking unit size.

- Small fruit and berries: a package of blueberries or a package of strawberries
- Leaf vegetables: a head of lettuce or a bunch of collard green leaves
- Stalk/root vegetables: a bunch of carrots or a bunch of celery sticks
- Deli sliced items: a package of turkey slices or a package of cheddar cheese slices
- Grains: a bag or sack of rice or a box of oatmeal

If a food item is usually or often sold singly, then that single unit may constitute one stocking unit. What follows is an illustrative, but not exhaustive, list of such products and their standard stocking unit sizes:

- Loose fruit: a banana or an apple
- Large fruits or vegetables: a watermelon or a pumpkin
- Small portion or single-serving packages: a yogurt cup or a fruit cup

If a food item (e.g., grains, dried fruits, nuts, deli cold cuts, etc.) is stored singly in a common container or unit, but sold to customers by weight, then the standard stocking unit is considered to be one pound. A bulk canister containing three pounds of dried cranberries, available to and sold to the customer by weight, therefore, would constitute three stocking units of one variety in the fruit or vegetable staple food category.

If FNS determines that a bunch, box, bag, or package usually sold as a unit has been subdivided into unreasonably small units in order to meet this depth of stock provision, FNS will not consider such food items to constitute a stocking unit for the purposes of this depth of stock provision.