

~~Nitrite~~ Action Network

Protect California's Children: Remove Nitrate- and Nitrite-Cured Processed Meats from School Meals

SUMMARY

Nitrates and nitrites are commonly used to cure processed meats¹ such as bacon, sausage, hot dogs, and luncheon meats. However, exposure to these additives increases the risk of cancer and other serious health conditions, especially in children. Removing nitrate- and nitrite--cured processed meats from California school meals would protect millions of children, particularly those socioeconomically disadvantaged, from preventable diet-related health harms.

PROBLEM

California's 5.8 million public school students frequently consume processed meats in school meals at both breakfast and lunch.^{2, 3} Many of these products are cured with nitrates and nitrites, additives that can form carcinogenic compounds in the body.⁴ Extensive evidence links consumption of just 50 grams of processed meat per day (about one hot dog) to an 18 percent increased risk of colorectal cancer.¹ Consuming processed meat is also associated with a higher risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes.⁵ In addition, high nitrate and nitrite exposures can impair the blood's ability to carry oxygen and have been linked to reproductive and developmental harms, particularly for infants and young children.^{6, 7} Given that state schools are projected to serve roughly 1 billion meals in the 2025–26 school year, processed meats constitute a significant, repeated source of exposure to these harmful additives for California's children.⁸

Roughly 63 percent of California public school students are classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged and are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.^{9, 10} For many of these children, school breakfast and lunch are their most reliable source of daily nutrition. Because of this, nitrate- and nitrite-cured processed meats are a disproportionate burden for those already facing the greatest health and economic inequities.

¹ "Processed meat refers to meat that has been transformed through salting, curing, fermentation, smoking, or other processes to enhance flavour or improve preservation. Most processed meats contain pork or beef, but processed meats may also contain other red meats, poultry, offal, or meat by-products such as blood." International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). IARC Monographs evaluate consumption of red meat and processed meat (Press Release No. 240). World Health Organization. October 26, 2015. Accessed October 10, 2025. https://www.iarc.who.int/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/pr240_E.pdf

² California Department of Education. Fingertip Facts on Education in California. Accessed December 1, 2025.

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/ceffingertipfacts.asp>

³ Friends of the Earth. The State of School Lunch in California. March 10, 2021. Accessed November 6, 2025.

<https://foe.org/resources/the-state-of-school-lunch-in-california/>

⁴ Zhang et al. Nitrite and nitrate in meat processing: functions and alternatives. *Curr Res Food Sci.* 2023;6:100470.

⁵ Micha et al. Red and Processed Meat Consumption and Risk of Incident Coronary Heart Disease, Stroke, and Diabetes Mellitus: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Circulation.* 2010;121(21):2271-2283.

⁶ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Why is nitrate contamination a concern? Accessed November 6, 2025.

<https://www.epa.gov/mn/why-nitrate-contamination-concern>

⁷ Royal et al. Prenatal exposure to nitrate in drinking water and adverse health outcomes. *Curr Environ Health Rep.* 2023;10(3):250-263.

⁸ Hecht. California's School Meals for All Program: Evaluation reveals a host of benefits. California School Boards Association. Accessed November 6, 2025. <https://publications.csba.org/issue/summer-2025/californias-school-meals-for-all-program-evaluation-reveals-a-host-of-benefits>

⁹ California School Dashboard. Student Population. Accessed November 6, 2025.

<https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/ca/2024>

¹⁰ Xie and Willis. A look at student poverty through free or reduced-price meal eligibility in California schools. November 3, 2025. Accessed November 6, 2025. <https://edsources.org/2025/snap-funding-school-meals/744305>

BACKGROUND

California has established a strong precedent in reducing diet-related health risks in schools and for consumers across the state. Recent actions include:

- Prohibiting schools from serving foods containing synthetic food dyes linked to child health harms (AB 2316).¹¹
- Enacting first-in-the-nation legislation to phase out ultra-processed foods associated with cancer and other health risks from school meals (AB 1264).¹²
- Banning four carcinogenic food additives from all foods sold within the state (AB 418).¹³
- Directing the California Department of Public Health, through Executive Order N-1-25, to provide recommendations on limiting the harms associated with ultra-processed foods and food ingredients that pose health risks.¹⁴

Nitrates and nitrites—both synthetic and naturally derived—are standard food additives used to cure processed meats.⁴ They extend shelf life, enhance color, texture, and flavor, and prevent the growth of harmful bacteria such as *Clostridium botulinum*.⁴ Once consumed, these additives can lead to the formation of N-nitroso compounds (nitrosamines) in the body, which can damage DNA and increase the risk of cancer and other serious health conditions.⁴ Several of these same nitrosamines are recognized under California's Proposition 65 as chemicals known to cause cancer, regardless of their source.¹⁵

School districts in California and New York City have already taken steps to remove or restrict processed meats in school meals.^{16, 17} Similarly, other countries are tightening standards on processed meats, including Scotland's limits on processed red meat in school meals and national actions in Denmark and France to reduce allowable nitrate and nitrite levels in processed meats.^{18, 19, 20}

Although the U.S. Department of Agriculture authorizes the use of these additives, it prohibits their use in baby and toddler foods and strictly limits the amounts allowed in processed meats, underscoring that

¹¹ California State Assembly. AB-2316 Pupil nutrition: meals and food standards. 2024. Accessed October 10, 2025. https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB2316

¹² California State Assembly. AB-1264 School meals: ultra-processed foods. 2025. Accessed October 10, 2025. https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260AB1264

¹³ California State Assembly. AB-418 Food safety: prohibited food additives. 2023. Accessed October 10, 2025. https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB418

¹⁴ Office of Governor Gavin Newsom. Executive Order N-1-25, January 3, 2025. <https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2025-1-1.Revised-Healthy-Foods-EO-Final-Gov-Signed.pdf>

¹⁵ Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment. Proposition 65. OEHHA, State of California. Updated October 2025. Accessed October 10, 2025. <https://oehha.ca.gov/proposition-65>

¹⁶ Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. Santa Barbara Unified School District Drops Processed Meat from the Lunch Menu. September 21, 2018. Accessed November 6, 2025. <https://www.pcrm.org/news/news-releases/santa-barbara-unified-school-district-drops-processed-meat-lunch-menu>

¹⁷ Pritchett. NYC Set To Cut All Processed Meat In Schools, Hospitals, And Care Centers. September 5, 2025. Accessed November 6, 2025. Plant Based News. <https://plantbasednews.org/lifestyle/health/nyc-to-cut-all-processed-meat/>

¹⁸ BBC. Processed red meat to be limited in Scotland's schools. June 13, 2019. Accessed November 6, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-48621272>

¹⁹ Official Journal of the European Union. COMMISSION DECISION (EU) 2024/1225 of 30 April 2024 concerning national provisions notified by Denmark on the addition of nitrite to certain meat products. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202401225

²⁰ De Clerq. France plans to cut use of nitrite in cured meats. The Poultry Site. February 9, 2022. Accessed November 6, 2025. <https://www.thepoultrysite.com/news/2022/02/france-plans-to-cut-use-of-nitrite-in-cured-meats>

children warrant stronger protection from exposure to these additives.^{4, 21} Because children are also exposed to these additives from other sources—such as drinking water and certain vegetables—minimizing exposure from processed meats is an important way to reduce cumulative risk.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

To protect California’s children, the state should adopt legislation that removes nitrate- and nitrite-cured processed meats from school meals, immediately reducing children’s exposure to these harmful additives.

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²¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture. Food Standards and Labeling Policy Book. Revised September 8, 2025. Accessed November 6, 2025. <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/sites/default/files/import/Labeling-Policy-Book.pdf>