

National School Food Policy

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Celiac Canada applauds the federal government's efforts to have a **National School Food Policy** that is inclusive; ensuring children with celiac disease, food allergies or special dietary requirements are *welcome at the table*.

Why Does it Matter?

Celiac disease (CeD) is a serious lifelong autoimmune condition affecting approximately **1 in 100 Canadian children and adults**. In individuals with the disease, ingestion of gluten (wheat, rye, barley) triggers an immune response that damages the small intestine. This damage impairs the body's ability to absorb nutrients, particularly iron, vitamin D, calcium, folate, and other B vitamins, which can lead to nutritional deficiencies.

Children with CeD may experience a range of symptoms including abdominal pain, fatigue, behavioural problems, headaches, low iron, gastrointestinal distress, canker sores and dental defects, skin rash, brittle bones and impaired growth. Repeated gluten exposure can contribute to long-term health complications and reduction in full participation in school such as early onset osteopenia, anemia, neurological conditions or puberty (delayed or longer periods, fertility problems).

Managing the disease requires Medical Nutrition Therapy (MNT) and a strict adherence to a lifelong gluten-free diet where **even the smallest amount of crumbs** can cause acute illness. This can be particularly challenging for children in school environments where meals are prepared and served in shared food service settings.

Beyond physical health impacts, research suggests that individuals with CeD may experience anxiety, stress related to maintaining a strict gluten-free diet, and feelings of social exclusion or food bullying in social and food-centered environments.¹ These challenges may be particularly difficult for children in school settings where food is frequently shared or prepared in common environments.

The expansion of school food programs across Canada presents an opportunity to improve access to nutritious meals for children. However, safely including children with medically required diets requires specific food safety practices and staff training.

Vulnerable Students within a Vulnerable Population

In a recent Alberta Health study discovered that **1 in 2 families** with a child with CeD in Canada face some degree of food insecurity.² Importantly, as the level of food insecurity is amplified, the likelihood of non-adherence to the MNT dramatically increases.³

¹ Food insecurity impacts diet quality and adherence to the gluten-free diet in youth with celiac disease.

² Gluten-free food affordability a struggle for nearly half of Canadian households with kids who have celiac disease | Folio

³ Wang X, Anders S, Jiang Z, et al. Food insecurity impacts diet quality and adherence to the gluten-free diet in youth with celiac disease. *J Pediatr Gastroenterol Nutr*. Published online October 28, 2024.

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Beyond non-adherence to the MNT itself, significantly greater odds of consuming processed gluten-free foods, fewer fresh fruits and vegetables, and fewer gluten-free grains, respectively, were identified among food insecure families.⁴

Our 2022 *State of Celiac Disease in Canada* study of 7,500 Canadians also revealed that **81%** of respondents have found that school lunches are very stressful and **68%** are emotionally impacted when others are indifferent to their needs.

As the Government of Canada expands national school food programming to help “*raise the floor for Canadians and save hundreds on groceries*”⁵, clear policy recognition and operational safeguards are needed to ensure children with celiac disease can safely access school meals and not be left out due to budgetary concerns.

Without proper measures, children with CeD will remain excluded from school meal programs, increasing health risks and financial pressures on families. **Every child deserves a safe seat at the table.**

Key Findings from Celiac Experts

Celiac Canada conducted a survey with celiac experts and community leaders that included registered dietitians, medical practitioners, educators, celiac chapter representatives, and individuals with lived experience. The consultation identified several key implementation considerations.

The findings indicated that program staff and volunteer training is essential

All respondents identified the need for staff training in:

- gluten cross-contact prevention
- product procurement and ingredient label verification
- safe gluten-free food preparation protocols
- understanding the medical nature of celiac disease

Safe school meals support equity, health, and participation

Participants emphasized that when safe gluten-free meals are unavailable, children with CeD may:

- skip meals and go hungry,
- be tempted to eat foods that are unsafe just to fit in,
- develop disordered eating habits, and/or
- experience increased social exclusion, anxiety or depression.

Providing safe gluten-free options within school food programs supports equitable participation and may contribute to improved nutrition, attendance, and learning outcomes.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Finance Minister, Hon. Philip Champagne, Spring Economic Statement, House of Commons, April 28, 2026.



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How We Can Help

For over 50 years, Celiac Canada has been the only national charity driving celiac disease awareness, education and research backed by a Scientific Medical Advisory Board of celiac experts including gastroenterologists, registered dietitians, cereal scientists and primary care physicians. We have created resources and guides that have been shared nationally and internationally for consumers, medical, and food service sectors. We are proud members of the Coalition for Healthy School Food, Health Coalition of Canada and Research Canada.

Celiac Canada Recommendations

To support safe inclusion of children with CeD in school food programs, the following actions are recommended:

- 1. Ensure that any related guidelines to the National School Food Program or Policy incorporate inclusive language and guidance on celiac disease along with gluten-free food availability to acknowledge students' right to safe food as part of their MNT.**
- 2. Work with Celiac Canada experts in the development of national guidance and/or education materials to address key risk areas including food procurement and ingredient verification, preparation surfaces, equipment use, storage practices, and meal service procedures.**

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