

# FOOD PANTRY NUTRITION CLASSES

## *A Guide for Nutrition Educators*





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In the United States, 14% of households were food insecure in 2014, which means they didn't have access to adequate, nutritious foods. In North Carolina, that number is even higher: 16.7% (Feeding America). At the same time, food pantries and food banks are working hard to ensure that their clients have access to healthy foods. In a survey of food pantry directors in three counties in North Carolina, almost half (43%) of directors said that providing nutrition education for their clients was a top priority. Nutrition classes can support participants as they shop for, prepare, and serve healthy and affordable foods. However, it is important to remember that classes in a food pantry setting must be adapted to meet the needs of food pantry clients. To do this, it is crucial to work in close partnership with food pantry directors. This guide is designed to be used as part of a regular series of nutrition education classes, such as SNAP-Ed, the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), Faithful Families Eating Smart and Moving More, or other community nutrition education programs.



All photographs in this guide were taken by Donn Young for The Hunger Project—A Portrait of Hunger in North Carolina.





## Work closely with food pantry staff and find local partners

Make sure that you work closely with the food pantry director in planning classes for food pantry clients. Other key staff members to talk with include the warehouse manager (or the person who coordinates stocking of food), the resource coordinator (or the person who obtains food donations from farmers and other local sources), and food pantry volunteers.

Reach out to the food bank or pantry in your area to find out about the services they offer.

To find your local food pantry or food bank, visit this link: [feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank](https://feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank)

Additional local partners might include:

- 4-H Agents or Youth Program Assistants
- ECA or other Extension volunteers
- Health educators from the local health department
- Nutrition educators from SNAP-Ed, EFNEP, Faithful Families, or another program
- University students

## What's the difference between a food bank and a food pantry?

**FOOD BANKS** are regional food hubs where pantries and other organizations get food. **FOOD PANTRIES** are food distribution sites. Nutrition classes could work at both food banks and food pantries, but the needs might be different. The key is working with the organization to make sure the classes are tailored for the needs of the organization and its clients!

# Before you get started with a food pantry class, here are some things to consider:



**WHO** should come? Work with pantry staff to figure out the best ways to recruit clients and the best time to register clients for the class.

**WHAT** topics should you cover? There are lots of topics you could cover in classes at a food pantry. Ask the pantry director for their input. What are their clients interested in learning? What questions do they have? What particular challenges do they face?

**WHEN** will you hold the classes? It is critical to work with the food pantry director and staff or volunteers to figure out what times will work best for their clients. Holding classes just before pantry distribution times or when people are already waiting in line makes it more convenient for the clients. Some EFNEP Program Assistants (PAs) have provided lessons on a continuous loop during distribution times, instead of scheduling classes for certain times. Work with the food pantry director, staff, or volunteers to determine if it would be best to hold classes before or after clients have picked up their boxes since that will depend on food pantry client volume and distribution layout. For pantries with a more open distribution schedule, talk with the director to identify high-traffic times.

**WHERE** will you host the classes? Holding the class on-site will likely be most convenient for clients. Think about the spaces within the pantry that will work for the class. If classes are held during distribution days, it may work well to set up demonstrations and classes next to the line of people waiting for food. This gives clients the opportunity to see and sample food demonstrations at a time when they would otherwise just be waiting. EFNEP PAs who have worked with food pantries said that finding a space for the classes was one of their biggest challenges. You may need to hold the class in a hallway or waiting area, which could mean adjusting the class set-up and food demonstrations. Depending on what types of foods you prepare, you might need access to a kitchen or refrigerator. However, food pantries do not always have kitchen or storage space. Be prepared to bring your own equipment and safe storage units. You might have to prep food for demonstrations in advance.

**HOW OFTEN** will you hold the classes? You may need to adjust the frequency of classes to correspond with the food pantry distribution schedule. For example, if clients are allowed to visit the pantry once every two weeks, it will probably make sense to hold the classes once every two weeks.

**WHY** pantry classes? We have learned from EFNEP PAs in North Carolina that these classes can be a great way to help pantry clients learn how to better use the foods in their pantry boxes and learn important food resource management strategies that may help families become more food secure.



Once you have a team on board to work on the pantry-based classes, talk through the *who, what, when, and where* questions. As your team makes a plan, you might work through the following steps to implement your classes:



**1. PLAN** your classes. Sit down with the pantry director or staff and talk about your goals for the class. What would you like participants to do or learn? How will you accomplish that? EFNEP PAs in North Carolina have shared that food demonstrations and/or food tastings are an important part of pantry classes, particularly for classes held when clients are waiting to pick up food. They also emphasized the importance of being flexible and adapting the content and timing of the classes to the needs of the clients.

**2. RECRUIT** participants. Work with the food pantry director to recruit participants for the classes. Consider barriers to participating, like childcare or transportation, and work with your partners to come up with some solutions. Also work with food pantry staff and volunteers to think about when and how to do any enrollment paperwork. Asking volunteers to help with enrollment will give you more time to focus on your class! At most pantries, participants have to complete paperwork to qualify for food distributed by the food pantry or food bank. This is an ideal time for participants to also complete program enrollment data. For EFNEP, the new food recall video can be a useful tool for volunteers helping with this process. When recruiting, be sure to let participants know what they will get out of the classes—in addition to learning about healthy foods, some pantries may be able to offer incentives (for example, allowing class participants to be first in line on distribution days). Skill builders like cookbooks (such as *Cooking with EFNEP*) and kitchen tools (e.g., measuring cups, cutting boards) can also encourage

participation. Also think about how you will maintain contact with participants, since their address and phone number may change frequently. Using texts or social media (e.g., Facebook) to stay in touch may work better for some participants.

**3. GATHER** food for the classes. Classes will be more useful if they incorporate the same foods clients will receive from the pantry. Work with the pantry to find out what foods will be available for clients on the day you are holding the class. This allows pantry clients to learn about recipes and new ways of using items that might otherwise go to waste. As you work with your team, think about what recipes from *Cooking with EFNEP*—or other tested recipe sources approved for use with your program—would work best for your group. Consider participants' cultural backgrounds, cooking skills, preferences, and the types of cooking equipment they have at home as you are planning the food.

**REMEMBER:** Food pantry classes will be more successful if they incorporate foods from the pantry. Classes that incorporate fresh produce (from a pantry garden or donated by farmers) seem to work especially well.

**4. WORK** with volunteers from the food pantry and from your own or partner organizations. Be sure to recruit and train volunteers to work with you. They can help with some food preparation and assist with additional tasks as you are teaching the class. For example, volunteers could help you chop food ahead of time, so that you are able to demonstrate the recipe more quickly. Volunteers can also answer questions, hand out food samples, handle enrollment paperwork, or connect clients with other needed resources while you focus on your lesson and the food demonstrations. Follow your program's guidelines for volunteer training.

**5. COMMUNICATE** regularly with your team, before, during, and after the classes. Regular communication is key to making food pantry-based classes work. It is especially important that you stay in close contact with the food pantry staff and volunteers. You will want to meet or talk each week to discuss who will do what during the class sessions. Some questions you will want to discuss include: What foods will be used, and where will the foods come from (pantry boxes, donations, purchased)? What adaptations might be needed? Do we need to adjust the client flow protocol to improve the educational environment and overall experience for the clients? It is crucial that your team work together to make these classes a success!

**6. TEACH** your lessons! Look through your lessons and recipes, and think about ideas that you think will be especially useful and relevant for food pantry clients. Topics that have worked well for other pantry classes include food safety, smart shopping strategies, proper food storage, and food tasting and recipe demonstrations incorporating local produce and foods from the pantry baskets. Knowing your participants will help you tailor your classes to their needs, wishes, and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, try to provide class handouts and recipes in all languages that are used by pantry clients, if possible. This will help your participants to better grasp the material you are teaching and make it easier for them to try recipes at home. The pantry director can help you to understand their client population and needs.

**7. CELEBRATE** your success. Take photos of your class. Note that some participants may not want to be in the photos; it is important to respect their wishes and to get permission in advance if you do take pictures of participants. Talk with participants after your classes have ended about any skills or recipes that they added as a result of the classes. Ask participants to share how what they learned or how your classes helped them. Share any additional resources that can help participants to learn more about topics that interest them. Respond to any questions they have, or help them connect with people who can answer their questions.





# Tips for your class

Here are some ideas for activities that other nutrition educators have included in their food pantry classes. You will not be able to cover all of these elements in one class! However, you can select a few that fit the needs and interests of your class participants.

**Demonstrate food preparation skills** that can help families save time and money. Make sure to talk about ways to use the foods in the pantry boxes. For example, one EFNEP PA noticed that avocados were being thrown out from client pantry boxes. She incorporated avocados into recipe demonstrations so that clients would be able to get the most out of what they received each week. Other ideas might be to connect clients with information about food assistance programs like SNAP (food stamps). If cooking demonstrations are not possible due to the facilities of the pantry or time restrictions, you can use recipe videos or handouts that illustrate the cooking process and food safety techniques for the food tastings, in addition to your lesson plan.

**Partner with local organizations or people** who can provide additional education around topics that are of interest to the participants in your class. For example, you might ask the horticulture agent or a master gardener to come and talk about container gardening. A representative from a local farmers' market could introduce participants to the market and explain how they can use SNAP or WIC benefits there.

**Explore!** Encourage participants to bring their cultural foods and experiences into the classes. If you have clients who do not speak English, be sure to bring resources and handouts in their language. Ask them to share recipes, and, if needed, talk together about ways to make the recipes healthier. Participants likely have assets and skills related to cooking or growing food that they can share with others in the class. Invite discussion so that everyone can share from his or her knowledge!

**Consider talking with the pantry director** about ways that they can expand and encourage healthy choices at the food pantry. Depending on the pantry's resources, this might include things like: working with local farms and gardeners to offer surplus produce to clients; starting an on-site garden to provide fresh produce to clients; offering a client-directed model where clients can select the foods they would like in their baskets; "nudging" clients towards healthy options like whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables through the use of signage and stocking techniques that highlight healthy food choices. You can learn more about some of the resources that can help you with this work in the "Other Resources" section below!

**Do your homework in advance.** Pantries might have new or different foods that neither you nor your clients have prepared before. Work with your partners and county resources to learn the best cooking methods and tips to help you use the new food as an ingredient substitute in a tested program recipe. As an example, a food bank in North Carolina partners with North Carolina Hunters for the Hungry. Deer hunters donate venison to a food bank in the state. The EFNEP PA learned that venison was a lean meat and a healthy alternative to beef. She substituted the venison for beef in an EFNEP recipe and participants really enjoyed it!



# Other Resources

For additional resources or support related to food pantry-based classes, consider:

- **More In My Basket—North Carolina State University’s SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) Outreach Program:** [morefood.org/en](http://morefood.org/en)
- **Food Pantry and Food Bank Resources on the Local Foods Portal:** [localfood.ces.ncsu.edu/food-access-food-security/gleaning](http://localfood.ces.ncsu.edu/food-access-food-security/gleaning)
- **Feeding America Healthy Food Bank Hub:** [healthyfoodbankhub.feedingamerica.org](http://healthyfoodbankhub.feedingamerica.org)



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