Recently, food processors and brokers have received requests from their clients for an assurance that the products they sell contain “two ounces of protein.” The clients apparently want to make sure they are meeting the school lunch meal pattern requirements. This question brings up a confusion about terms which we would like to clarify.

Q. What is meat and what is protein?

A. Meat is a general term used to cover the flesh of beef, sheep and pigs. Although the different components of meat will vary depending on species of the animal and the cut of the meat, among other factors, an average picture of the composition of meat can be made.

Meat is composed of water, protein, fat and various amounts of minerals and vitamins. The protein in meat is found in the muscle tissue. The protein content of meat ranges from 15% to 20% of the piece of meat. Fat content is more variable, generally from 5% to 40%, depending on several factors including the type of animal and its diet, the cut of meat and the extent of trimming of the fat. Water content also varies from 55% to 70%.

Q. Are meat and protein the same thing?

A. No. Often the term protein is used interchangeable for the term meat. Protein, however, is only one component of meat. Although meat is a protein rich source, protein still only makes up about 18% of the meat. The terms should not be interchanged as they are not equivalent.

Q. What do the meal pattern requirements specify?

A. Schools participating in the school lunch program can be reimbursed for meals but must agree to serve lunches that meet meal pattern requirements established in Federal regulations. The types of foods authorized to fulfill requirements include those that are specified within one of
the four food categories (meat/meat alternate, vegetable and/or fruit, bread/bread alternate and milk). The school lunch meal pattern requirements state that 2 ounces of lean cooked meat, poultry or fish (edible portions as served) will fulfill the Group IV meat/meat alternate component of the meal pattern.

The meal pattern requirements specify meat/meat alternate. The requirements do not mention protein. A request for a product to supply two ounces of protein has no meaning and does not meet the requirements of the meal pattern.