

Understanding Nutrition:

Primer Module on WIC

History and Overview

The federal Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) works to support the healthy development of infants and children living in low-income^a households. Specifically, WIC serves nutritionally at-risk^b children less than five years of age and nutritionally at-risk pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women. WIC provides access to healthy foods, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and a host of other support services.

Originating as a pilot project in 1972, WIC became a permanent, nationwide health and nutrition program by 1974. WIC is administered federally by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and within California by the state's Department of Public Health (CDPH). The California WIC Program (California WIC) partners with 84 county agencies and nonprofit organizations to administer and operate the program at over 650 local sites.

WIC is fully federally funded, but it is not an entitlement program. Rather, WIC funding is contingent on an annual appropriation by Congress. When need exceeds available funding, local WIC agencies use a specific set of criteria^c to determine which eligible applicants will receive benefits.

California WIC is the largest WIC program in the nation, serving approximately 1.5 million participants¹ with \$1.2 billion in federal funding² during 2010. Twenty-three percent of California WIC participants are pregnant or postpartum women, 20 percent are infants 0-11 months, and 57 percent are children ages 1- 5 years old.³ In 2009, nearly 60 percent of all infants born in California were enrolled in WIC.⁴ When last assessed (a 2005 analysis of 2003 data), WIC served over 80 percent of those eligible for the program.⁵

Health and Fiscal Impacts

Research shows that WIC participation improves women's health and pregnancy outcomes as well as children's health and development. For example, compared to WIC-eligible non-participants, WIC clients have healthier diets.^{6, 7, 8} Similarly, compared to income-eligible nonparticipants, WIC clients experience lower rates of infant mortality and premature birth.^{d, 9}

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Recommended Citation

^a "Low-income" is defined as at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines.

^b Nutritional risk includes conditions such as anemia, underweight, maternal age, history of pregnancy complications, and inadequate diet.

^c For more information on the prioritization of WIC applicants, please see: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/howtoapply/eligibilityprioritysystem.htm>.

^d The comparison population for the birth outcomes study was comprised of Medicaid-eligible women. In some states, income thresholds for Medicaid were lower than those for WIC. Thus, the entire comparison population was income-eligible for WIC, but in some states the comparison population may not have represented all income-eligible women.

Studies also show improved breastfeeding rates among WIC participants.^{10 11} Breastfeeding is associated with better health for mothers and their children, such as decreased risk for childhood obesity and overweight.^{12, 13}

The health impacts of WIC translate into health care savings. For instance, due to WIC's positive effects on birth weight alone, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) concluded that every federal dollar spent on WIC saves more than three dollars that would otherwise be spent on health care costs.¹⁴

How WIC Serves Participants

During their first WIC appointment, applicants are certified for income eligibility and receive a nutrition assessment to determine their nutrition and education needs. Eligible participants receive monthly WIC checks (also known as vouchers) to purchase items from their respective "food packages." Food packages are standardized sets of nutritious foods developed for different groups of WIC clients: pregnant women, post-partum lactating women, and children within specific age ranges.

Food packages include items such as milk, fruits, vegetables, cheese or soy products, eggs, cereal, 100% juice, dry beans, peanut butter, whole grains, and infant formula for mothers who do not breastfeed their infants. WIC foods are generally high in protein, calcium, iron, Vitamins A and C, and other nutrients necessary for healthy development.

In FFY 2010, California participants received an average benefit of \$47 per month,¹⁵ which can be used at over 5,100 WIC-approved stores statewide.¹⁶ The new WIC checks for fruits and vegetables can also be redeemed at participating farmers' markets.

New WIC Foods

In 2009, the WIC food packages were revised to more closely align with the 2005 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. This revision affected both the types and amounts of food available through WIC.^a For example, the WIC food package now includes fruits, vegetables, soy products, whole grains, and lower-fat milk for women and children over the age of two. Moreover, to encourage families to consume lower-fat dairy products, whole milk is now available only for children under the age of two. To encourage breastfeeding, breastfeeding mothers now receive more food with greater variety and additional support from trained WIC staff.

Studies have shown that the new WIC foods, in conjunction with California WIC's nutrition education efforts, have increased participants' consumption of vegetables, fruit, whole grains, and lower-fat milk.¹⁷ Studies have also shown that following implementation of the new WIC food packages, WIC-approved stores offer an increased variety and amount of nutritious foods, such as fresh produce and whole grains.¹⁸

^a For more information on the new WIC foods, see:
[http://www.cce.csus.edu/conferences/childobesity/11/uploads/Gradziel,%20Longer%20New%20Food%20Package%20\(Final\).pdf](http://www.cce.csus.edu/conferences/childobesity/11/uploads/Gradziel,%20Longer%20New%20Food%20Package%20(Final).pdf)

Breastfeeding Support

To support mothers with infants, California WIC offers services such as breastfeeding support, lactation counseling, and baby behavior classes, which teach new parents about normal infant behaviors and infant-feeding recommendations. Breastfeeding support is a core function of WIC services, and a majority of local WIC agencies in California now offer [Breastfeeding Peer Counseling](#).

These strategies are effective. Among WIC participants, the initiation of breastfeeding rose from 56 percent in 2004 to 61 percent in 2010. During the same time period, exclusive breastfeeding at two and three months rose from 14 to 25 percent among WIC infants.¹⁹

Nutrition Education

Throughout California, local WIC agencies use coordinated, evidence-based strategies for nutrition education among participants. For example, California WIC successfully partnered with Sesame Workshop on the *Healthy Habits Campaign* to promote the healthy new WIC foods to both staff and participants, and with the California Center on Public Health Advocacy on *ReThink Your Drink*, designed to decrease consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages.

WIC and Farmers' Markets

There are two ways that WIC participants can access fresh fruits and vegetables and other foods through farmers' markets.

Fruit and Vegetable Checks

WIC food packages were changed in October 2009 to include produce, and WIC participants are provided with a WIC *fruit & vegetable check* (see example to right) that can be used to purchase produce at farmers' markets (and stores) as part of the monthly food allotment for all WIC families.

INDIVIDUAL NO.	PARTICIPANT / PARENT / GUARDIAN	FIRST DAY TO USE	LAST DAY TO USE	SERIAL NO.
00000000XX	PATTY PARTICIPANT	MAY 10 11	JUN 8 11	269534015
CALIFORNIA WIC WOMEN, INFANTS & CHILDREN		FOOD ITEM NUMBER: 2006 Pay to the order of: WIC Authorized Vendor		700-269534015 90-7382 7344
What to buy: \$10 (TEN DOLLARS) FRUITS AND VEGETABLES MAY COMBINE FRESH, FROZEN, AND CANNED		EXACT PURCHASE PRICE \$10.00		MUST NOT EXCEED MAXIMUM ALLOWABLE BY PARTICIPANT'S MONTHLY WIC FOOD ITEM NUMBER 2006
PARTICIPANT MAY PAY AMOUNT OVER \$10 (TEN DOLLARS)		State of California WIC Program VOID IF NOT DEPOSITED WITHIN 45 DAYS OF FIRST DAY TO USE - NOT VALID IF ALTERED.		VALID ONLY FOR FOOD ITEMS SPECIFIED IN THE CALIFORNIA WIC AUTHORIZED FOOD LIST. Patty Participant AUTHORIZED SIGNATURE (SIGN AT PURCHASE)

WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program

The WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) is a program separate from WIC and funded by the USDA. Food costs associated with the FMNP are federally funded, as are 70 percent of the state's administrative costs. California runs the largest WIC FMNP in the nation and received approximately \$2.5 million in federal funds in 2010²⁰ to serve nearly 150,000 families.²¹

The WIC FMNP operates from May to October and provides WIC recipients with coupons that can be used only at participating farmers' markets. Eligible California participants receive \$20 in vouchers to purchase fresh fruits, vegetables and herbs.²²

To learn more about WIC, go to:

- CDPH WIC website: www.wicworks.ca.gov
- The California WIC Association's website: <http://www.calwic.org/>
- USDA WIC website: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/>

END NOTES

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- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ CDPH. (2005). *California Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC): Estimated Percent of Eligible Population Enrolled* [PDF document]. Retrieved from <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Documents/WIC-Reports-EstimatedPercentOfEligiblePopulationEnrolledMethod03-CFPA.pdf>
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- ¹⁵ USDA Food and Nutrition Service. (July 2011). *WIC Program: Average Monthly Benefit per Person* [Web page]. Retrieved from [http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/25wifyavgfd\\$.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/25wifyavgfd$.htm)
- ¹⁶ CDPH. (February 2011). *California WIC Program at a Glance* [PDF document]. Retrieved from <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Documents/Program%20Brief%20Bifold%202011-02%20FINAL.pdf>
- ¹⁷ Ritchie, Lorrene D., et al. (2010). Favorable Impact of Nutrition Education on California WIC Families. *Journal of Nutrition Behavior*, 42(3), S2-S10.
- ¹⁸ Gleason, S., et al. (March 2011). *Impact of the Revised WIC Food Package on Small WIC Vendors: Insight From a Four-State Evaluation* [PDF document]. Retrieved from http://www.calwic.org/storage/FourStateWICFoodPackageEvaluation-Full_Report-20May11.pdf
- (See also: <http://www.altarum.org/publications-resources-health-systems-research/WIC-Food-Package-Symposium-Multimedia>).

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²² Ibid.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This module on WIC is one component of *Understanding Nutrition: A Primer on Programs and Policies in California*. Go to www.ccrwf.org to access additional modules.

The primer program modules were produced by the California Center for Research on Women and Families (CCRWF), in partnership with California Food Policy Advocates and the California Department of Public Health's *Network for a Healthy California (Network)*, a public health effort working with hundreds of partners and organizations to empower low-income Californians to live healthier lives through good nutrition and physical activity.

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