

Overview of the WIC Program

WIC is based on the premise that early intervention programs during critical times of growth and development can help prevent future medical and developmental problems. Administered by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the program provides grants for food benefits, nutrition services, and administration to 90 WIC State agencies, including the 50 States, the District of Columbia, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and 34 Indian tribal organizations. Each State agency is responsible for program operations within its jurisdictions.

Since its establishment in the early 1970s, WIC has become one of the central components of the Nation's food assistance system. In fiscal year 2005, an average 8 million persons participated in the program each month (USDA, 2005). This includes over 2 million infants, or almost half of all infants born in the United States.

To qualify for WIC, a family's income must be at or below 185 percent of the Federal poverty guidelines (\$35,798 for a family of four in July 2005).⁷ Applicants must also be nutritionally at risk, as determined by a health professional such as a physician, nutritionist, or nurse.⁸

The authorized foods provided through WIC are high in one or more of five target nutrients—protein, calcium, iron, and vitamins A and C—identified as lacking in the diets of the program's target population, which may result in adverse health consequences. Participants are prescribed one of seven food packages according to participant category. The food package for nonbreastfed infants less than 1 year of age provides up to the monthly maximum allowance of 403 fluid ounces of liquid concentrate infant formula, 806 fluid ounces of infant formula in ready-to-feed form, or 8 pounds of powdered infant formula.⁹ The maximum monthly allowance of liquid concentrate, the equivalent of 31 13-ounce cans of liquid concentrate, reconstitutes to 806 fluid ounces.

To provide program participants with supplemental food packages, States may use three types of food delivery systems (or any combination of the three):

- Retail food delivery systems—participants obtain supplemental food free of charge by transacting a food instrument at authorized retail vendors.
- Home food delivery systems—supplemental foods are delivered to the participant's home.
- Direct distribution food delivery systems—participants pick up supplemental foods from storage facilities operated by the State or local agency.

Most States distribute WIC foods primarily via the retail food delivery systems. (The exceptions are Vermont and one Indian tribal organization, which use a home delivery system; and Mississippi and one Indian tribal organization, which use direct distribution.) Under the retail food delivery system, participants purchase the WIC food items from retail foodstores

⁷Applicants who participate or who have certain family members who participate in the Food Stamp, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance Program for Needy Families (TANF) programs are deemed to meet the income eligibility criterion automatically.

⁸WIC applicants are required to meet only one of a number of nutritional risk criteria to be eligible for WIC. Research has determined "that nearly all U.S. women and children" meet at least one of the criteria and are thus considered to be at nutritional risk (Institute of Medicine, 2002).

⁹Starting at 4 months, the infant packages also provide infant cereal and fruit juice.

using a food instrument (i.e., voucher, coupon, or EBT card) that specifies the types and amounts of foods that can be purchased.¹⁰ Only those vendors (usually supermarkets, grocery stores, or pharmacies) authorized by the WIC State agency may transact and redeem food instruments. Generally, retailers submit the instruments to their bank, which submits them to the WIC State agency's bank. That bank then pays the vendors the full retail price (i.e., shelf price) of the WIC food items with funds provided by the WIC State agency in a manner set forth in the State agency's contract with the bank.

Because WIC is a discretionary grant program funded annually at a level determined by appropriations law, the number of participants that can be served depends on the annual congressional appropriations as well as the cost of operating the program.¹¹ Cost-containment practices thus enable WIC to increase the number of applicants it can enroll.

¹⁰ The food instrument also specifies the brand of infant formula.

¹¹In the event that WIC does not have the funds to enroll all eligible applicants, WIC developed a priority system to ensure that those at the greatest nutrition risk receive program benefits. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, in recent years, funding has been sufficient to provide benefits to nearly all eligible persons who applied.