



United States Department of Agriculture

Women, Infants and Children (WIC)

Questions and Answers about the WIC Food Packages

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General Questions

How were the WIC-eligible foods chosen for the program?

The WIC food packages provide supplemental foods designed to meet the special nutritional needs of low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, non-breastfeeding postpartum women, infants and children up to five years of age who are at nutritional risk. In September 2003, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) contracted with the National Academies' Institute of Medicine (IOM) to independently review the WIC Food Packages. FNS charged the IOM with reviewing the nutritional needs of the WIC population, and recommending cost-neutral changes to the WIC food packages. The IOM selected a Committee of experts in nutrition, health, risk assessment, and economics to conduct this review. In making its recommendations, the IOM considered nutrient intakes and dietary patterns, the major diet-related health problems and risks faced by WIC's target population, the characteristics of the WIC Program, and the diversity of its participants. The food packages align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and infant feeding practice guidelines of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

How do the food packages appeal to WIC's culturally diverse populations?

The food packages provide participant choice and variety. Foods such as tortillas, brown rice, soy-based beverage, tofu, canned salmon, and a wide choice of fruits and vegetables provide State agencies flexibility in prescribing culturally appropriate food packages.

How do the food packages support breastfeeding?

The food packages for breastfeeding infant-mother pairs provide incentives for continued breastfeeding. For example, the food package for fully breastfeeding women provides greater quantity and varieties of foods. Fully breastfeeding infants receive baby food meats in addition to greater amounts of baby food fruits and vegetables. Less infant formula is provided to partially breastfeeding infants so that they may receive the benefits of breastmilk. The quantity of infant formula available to partially breastfeeding infants in the first month after birth is limited in order to help mothers build and maintain their milk production.

Is there a list of all WIC-eligible foods available?

Although Federal regulations specify the minimum nutritional requirements for the WIC foods, State agencies have a considerable amount of latitude in determining which foods to include on State authorized foods lists. State agencies make such decisions based on participant acceptance, product distribution within a State, cost, and administrative feasibility. Because State agencies are required to identify WIC-eligible foods, which vary from State to State, there is no consolidated list available. Due to the large number of locally and regionally available foods, including store brands and generics, and the frequent changes in formulation of foods by manufacturers, it is administratively difficult to maintain a national list of all possible WIC-eligible foods.

Are organic foods WIC-eligible?

Some organic forms of WIC-eligible foods (e.g., milk, eggs, cheese) meet the nutritional requirements set forth in WIC regulations and are therefore authorized. However, WIC State agencies are responsible for determining the brands and types of foods to authorize on their State WIC food lists. Some State agencies may allow organic foods on their foods lists, but this will vary by State. The decision may be influenced by a number of factors such as cost, product distribution within a State, and WIC participant acceptance. Organic fruits and vegetables purchased via the WIC cash-value voucher are authorized; there is not State agency discretion to disallow them. The cash-value voucher may be redeemed for any WIC-eligible fruit and vegetable.

How does the WIC food package serve participants who have food allergies/intolerances?

The WIC Program works hard to serve a large population that has various nutritional needs, including food allergies/intolerances. However, the foods eligible for the WIC food packages must meet nutritional requirements set by Federal regulations. If a participant has food allergies, WIC staff may tailor food packages to better meet the participant's individual needs. Types and quantities of foods in the food package may be adjusted to meet individual dietary needs. For example, if a child on WIC is allergic to peanut butter, dried beans/peas may be substituted for the peanut butter. If a pregnant woman on WIC is lactose-intolerant, lactose-reduced milk or soy-based beverage may be substituted. If an infant on WIC has a medical condition requiring an exempt infant formula, the participant may receive such a formula with appropriate medical documentation.

Are artificial sweeteners allowed?

Federal WIC regulations do not prohibit foods that contain artificial sweeteners. However, WIC State agencies are responsible for determining the brands and types of foods to authorize on their State WIC food lists. Some State agencies may allow foods sweetened with artificial sweeteners on their foods lists, but this will vary by State.

Fruits and Vegetables Questions

Can a State agency authorize only fresh fruits and vegetables?

Yes. Both fresh fruits and fresh vegetables must be authorized by State agencies. However, if the State agency chooses to *only* authorize fresh fruits and fresh vegetables, it must assure that such a decision would not adversely impact participants, such as situations where droughts limit availability of produce and homeless individuals who may have no ability to properly store fresh produce. The State agency must also consider the impact such a decision would have on small vendors.

Can a State agency authorize only processed fruits and vegetables?

No. Both fresh fruits and fresh vegetables must be authorized by State agencies. At the State agency's option, processed fruits and vegetables (canned, frozen, dried) may be substituted when fresh produce is limited or to accommodate participants who prefer processed forms. For example, the State agency may establish a different minimum stock and variety requirement for small vendors versus larger vendors that allows small vendors to meet the requirement by solely stocking processed fruits and vegetables.

Do State agencies have the authority to selectively choose which fruits or vegetables are available to WIC participants?

No. State agencies may not selectively choose which WIC-eligible fruits and vegetables are available to participants. For example, if a State agency chooses to offer dried fruits, it must authorize all WIC-eligible dried fruits, i.e., those without added sugars, fats, oils, or sodium, and may not allow only a single variety of dried fruits. State agencies may, however, invoke their administrative option to establish criteria in addition to the minimum Federal requirements which could include restricting packaging (such as plastic containers) and package sizes (such as single serving) of processed fruits and vegetables available for purchase with the cash-value voucher. In addition, State agencies may identify specific types of certain processed WIC-eligible fruits and vegetables (e.g., salsas, tomato sauces, stewed and diced tomatoes) on their food lists if they believe there is cause for significant vendor and participant confusion in identifying specific items within those categories that are WIC-eligible.

Are fruit and vegetable party platters allowed?

No. A party tray is a platter of fresh fruits and/or vegetables (with or without dips) as something that is marketed as a prepared party tray, meant to be purchased and served to a group of people at a gathering or a party. Party trays are not allowed to be purchased with the cash-value voucher.

Some foods like canned sweet peas have some sugar added for processing purposes, not as added sweeteners. Are these allowable foods under the "no added sugar" restriction?

It has come to the attention of FNS that the requirement for "no added sugar" in canned vegetables may exclude some commonly consumed foods from WIC State food lists. Small amounts of sugar are added to some foods that are naturally sugar-containing during the canning process. This small amount of added sugar is minimal and helps to maintain the quality and structure of the food. To encourage greater variety in food choices in the WIC food packages, canned vegetables and beans that contain a small amount of sugar for processing purposes, such as plain canned sweet peas, canned corn and canned kidney beans are allowed, at State agency option.

Farmers and Farmers' Markets Questions

May a State agency authorize a farmer to accept the cash-value voucher if the State agency does not currently administer the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP)?

Yes, any WIC State agency has the option to authorize farmers or farmers' markets to accept the cash-value voucher. 7 CFR 246.12(v) specifies the requirements regarding the authorization of farmers at farmers' markets. However, the requirements are designed to build on an FMNP infrastructure that already exists.

Does the minimum stocking requirement of at least two different fruits and two different vegetables apply to farmers who are authorized to accept the cash-value voucher?

No. The minimum stocking requirement does not apply to farmers and farmers' markets authorized to accept the cash-value voucher. However, the intent of the cash-value voucher is to allow participants choice and variety. State agencies that authorize farmers and farmers' markets to accept the cash-value voucher should consider issuing cash-value vouchers in small denominations so that participants may shop at multiple authorized farmers and farmers markets.

Cash-value voucher questions

May a participant pay the difference when the purchase of allowable fruits and vegetables exceeds the value of the fruit and vegetable voucher?

Yes. WIC regulations require State agencies to allow participants to pay the difference if the fruit and vegetable purchase exceeds the value of the cash-value voucher, a transaction known as "split tender." Split-tender transactions promote increased consumption of fruits and vegetables because participants are more likely to use the full cash value, rather than partially redeem the voucher for fear of exceeding its cash value. Since allowable WIC purchases would also be allowable SNAP purchases, a WIC participant who is also a SNAP recipient could opt to use SNAP benefits, cash or credit for payment of the price difference. Participants may not, however, be given cash or credit for any unused portion of the voucher.

Can sales tax be applied to purchases made with the cash-value voucher?

No, sales tax may not be applied to purchases made with the cash-value voucher. However, if a participant's purchase of fruits and vegetables exceeds the amount of the cash-value voucher, the balance is subject to sales tax. If the participant pays the balance with food stamps, the balance is not taxed.

States agencies that authorize farmers to accept WIC Cash Value Vouchers

Milk and Milk Alternatives questions

Is rice beverage WIC-eligible?

Rice-based beverages are not authorized milk substitutes in the WIC Program. Soy-based beverages that meet the Federal WIC nutrient requirements are authorized at the State agency's option.

Are lactose-reduced and lactose-free milk allowed? Is medical documentation required for participants to receive lactose-reduced and lactose-free milk?

These milks are allowed at State agency option. They do not require medical documentation.

Are flavored soy-based beverages that meet the nutrient standards allowed?

Yes.

Cereal questions

Can the State agency limit the cereals on its food list to only whole grain cereals?

Yes. While WIC regulations require that at least one half of the cereals on each State agency's authorized food list must be whole grain, State agencies may exercise their option to authorize only whole grain cereals.

Whole Wheat/Whole Grain Bread and Other Whole Grain Questions

Do State agencies have to offer bread or can they choose to offer only the whole grain options such as brown rice, tortillas, etc.?

State agencies must offer whole wheat or whole grain bread. It is a State agency option to authorize the whole grain options.

Are whole grain breads with added fruit, nuts and seeds allowed in the WIC Program?

Yes, whole grain breads with added fruit, nuts, and seeds are allowed provided they meet the minimum Federal requirements as specified for whole grain bread. The minimum Federal requirements for whole grain breads do not prohibit the addition of fruit, nuts, and seeds. However, State agencies are allowed to establish criteria in addition to the minimum Federal requirements for WIC supplemental foods; therefore State agencies may choose to disallow whole grain breads with added fruit, nuts, or seeds.

Infant Formula Questions

Are WIC participants able to choose the brand of infant formula to feed their infants?

WIC State agencies are responsible for identifying the types and brands of infant formulas that are authorized for use in their WIC Programs. The Federal regulations that govern the WIC Program outline the minimum requirements for WIC-eligible infant formula. WIC State agencies are required to have a competitively bid, sole-source rebate contract with a manufacturer of infant formulas. Under such an agreement, most healthy WIC infants may be provided either a milk-based or soy-based iron-fortified infant formula produced by the manufacturer awarded the contract. In turn, WIC State agencies receive a rebate per can of infant formula issued to a WIC infant. Infants who have special dietary needs are provided an appropriate alternative formula, in accordance with State WIC policies and Federal regulations. WIC rebate contracts and policies vary by State, therefore the types and brands of infant formula will vary by State.

If a WIC participant has a special dietary need, what does WIC require to receive an exempt infant formula or WIC-eligible nutritional?

Medical documentation is required for the issuance of exempt infant formulas and WIC-eligible nutritionals. Medical documentation means a determination by a licensed health care professional authorized to write medical prescriptions under State law that the participant has a qualifying condition that dictates the use of these formulas because the use of conventional foods is precluded or restricted. WIC State agencies are responsible for using Federal WIC regulations to determine the eligibility of exempt infant formulas and WIC-eligible nutritionals for their State WIC food lists. State agencies also determine the qualifying conditions that require the use of an exempt infant formula or WIC-eligible nutritionals. Only those formulas appearing on the State WIC food list may be issued to WIC participants. Please contact your local WIC Program to learn about the exempt infant formulas and WIC-eligible nutritionals authorized on their WIC food list, and their policy for providing non-contract brand of infant formulas to participants.

Where can I find more information about infant formula and/or report a problem or illness caused by an infant formula or find out about recalls?

Infant formulas and exempt infant formulas are regulated through the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (CFSAN). For more information about infant formulas or to report a problem, go to the FDA/CFSAN website at <http://www.fda.gov/Food/FoodSafety/Product-SpecificInformation/InfantFormula/default.htm>.

Package Size Questions

Can State agencies authorize package sizes that do not evenly divide into the maximum monthly allowance of a WIC food?

To achieve the nutrition and health goals of the Program and ensure the nutritional integrity of the food benefits provided to participants, State agencies must authorize WIC foods in package sizes that provide participants their full authorized food benefit. (This does not apply to infant foods or infant formula since rounding up is authorized in order to provide the full nutritional benefit for infants.) While not all manufacturers produce WIC foods in container sizes that provide the maximum allowance to participants, sufficient numbers of most WIC foods in sizes and forms that meet the maximum exist in the marketplace. State agencies must ensure that container sizes of authorized for their food lists do not shortchange the WIC food benefit for participants.

To allow flexibility for State agencies and choice for participants, FNS has allowed State agencies to authorize containers of certain foods in sizes that most closely meet container sizes that allow the maximum allowance for those foods as long as container sizes (*or combination of container sizes*) that provide the maximum allowance are also authorized. This allows some flexibility and choice when package sizes providing the maximum are limited, without compromising nutritional integrity. For example, beans in 15-16 ounce containers may be authorized as long as the State agency also authorizes a 16-ounce can that provides the maximum. Also, instant brown rice may be authorized in package sizes ranging from 14-16 ounces as long as the State agency also authorizes a 16 ounce package of regular brown rice. Approvals for package size flexibilities are granted to WIC State agencies on a case by case review by FNS.

For children, the juice requirement is 128 ounces. Since 12-ounce frozen (48 ounces reconstituted) and 46 ounce cans of single strength juice do not divide evenly into 128 ounces, can a State agency round down?

The State agency must ensure that the maximum juice allowance is provided. Therefore, they may not round up or round down. While not all manufacturers produce juice products in container sizes that meet the WIC's requirements, sufficient numbers of juice products exist in the marketplace in sizes and forms that do meet WIC requirements. WIC State agencies must use the appropriate physical form to achieve the maximum.

For example:

Food Package IV: Two 64-ounce containers single strength juice

Food Package V and VII: Three cans 11.5/12-ounce shelf stable or frozen (48 ounces reconstituted) or three 48-ounce bottles of single strength juice

Food Package VI: Two cans 11.5/12-ounce shelf stable or frozen (48 ounces reconstituted) or one 96 ounce bottle of single strength juice.

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