

GSA-08



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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December 10, 2003

Patricia Daniels, Director
Supplemental Food Programs Division
Food and Nutrition Services
USDA
3101 Park Center Drive
Room 520
Alexandria, VA 22302

Dear Ms. Daniels:

Enclosed are comments on revisions to the WIC food packages from the Division of WIC and Community Nutrition Services serving the Commonwealth of Virginia. These comments include ideas from Nutrition Liaisons working for the state, WIC coordinators working in the field, and participants of the WIC program. We hope you find these suggestions beneficial as the revisions are made.

Sincerely,

Donna T. Seward
Director, Division of WIC and Community Nutrition Services

Enclosure

Revisions to the WIC Food Packages from the Commonwealth of Virginia

1. What should be kept the same?
 - The current foods offered in the packages should be kept the same with the exceptions listed below under question 2.
2. What should be different in the current food package?
 - The number of children who are overweight or at risk for overweight is on the rise as well as the number of adults who are overweight or obese. In an effort to combat this, the amount of juice offered should be reduced to attempt to decrease the amount of sugar consumed via a drink in both children and adults. Most children drink well over the 4 to 6 ounces recommended as the daily limit. Decreasing the amount of juice offered through WIC could result in consumption of less juice. Less juice available could also result in an increase in water consumption among children and adult women participants.
 - WIC participants are encouraged to eat 5 servings of fruits and vegetables every day. Currently, the only food offered through WIC that constitutes a serving is juice. The first suggestion mentioned above is a reduction in the juice. In order to provide those vitamins lost by the reduction in the amount of juice and at the same time reinforce the 5-a-day message, fruits and vegetables should be added to the food package. Fruits and vegetables are available in fresh, canned or frozen forms. There is a wide selection of both canned fruit and canned or frozen vegetables available to the participants at their WIC approved grocery stores.
 - With the rise in overweight and obesity in both children and adults, a reduction in the amount of cheese should be explored. While an excellent source of calcium, it also provides excessive fat. An alternative to cheese would be yogurt which is available in reduced fat, low fat and nonfat versions. While high in calcium, it is lower in fat than its cheese counterparts. Reducing the amount of cheese and adding yogurt provides a lower fat way for participants to get calcium. Another possible substitution for milk would be tofu. This is a good alternative to provide calcium for people from those cultures in which cheese or milk are not readily used.
 - For both religious/cultural reasons and intolerance issues, some participants cannot drink cow's milk or lactose free milk. To get the nutritional benefit of milk these participants use soy milk. However, while soy formula, cow's milk and lactose free milk are provided through the WIC program, soy milk is not an option. This omission should be reconsidered and soy milk should be added as a substitution for cow's milk in the same way as lactose free milk.
 - Many participants from Asian and Middle Eastern countries are not accustomed to using American breakfast cereals. This can lead to food purchased by WIC funds going to waste and the essential nutrients not reaching the participants. However, rice is a staple in both of these cultures. Due to this, allow participants a choice of either cereal or enriched rice.
3. Should the quantities of the current food packages be adjusted?
 - Reduce the quantity of juice (explanation under question 2)
 - Reduce the quantity of cheese (explanation under question 2)

- Provide food packages with adjusted quantities that take into account the number of WIC participants in a family. A common complaint of WIC participants is that with more than one person on WIC, they have so much food that it does not always get eaten before spoiling. To help reduce this waste, a possible solution would be an option to decrease the quantity of food by a certain percent for each additional person added to the program. Another solution would be to allow enough flexibility with quantity so the participant may decide how much of each food item they will actually be able to use within a months time.
4. What nutrients should be established as priority nutrients?
 - The current nutrients used should be kept as priority nutrients: Calcium, Protein, Iron, Vitamin C, Vitamin A (breastfeeding). These are nutrients that are important during growth and development and are sometimes lacking in low income families.
 - Due to recent research, it has been shown that a deficiency in folic acid during the early stages of pregnancy can result in neural tube defects. Because of this, women of childbearing age are encouraged to eat foods rich in folic acid or take supplements to prevent folic acid deficiency. For this reason, folic acid should be established as a priority nutrient for those participants who fall within childbearing age –pregnant, non-breastfeeding and breastfeeding women.
 5. Can the WIC food packages be revised to have a positive effect on overweight?
 - There are two main recommendations to have a positive effect on overweight. The first is to reduce the amount of cheese prescribed. The cheese while having a positive effect on a person's calcium level is a high fat food. By adding low fat calcium foods, such as yogurt and tofu, the calcium level can be kept high while the fat is reduced. The second recommendation is to reduce the amount of juice offered. Children typically get more juice than the recommended 4 to 6 ounces a day. This results in excessive sugar intake from the natural sugars in the juice. Drinking will not typically satisfy a person's hunger. When these children consume an excessive amount of juice and still consume three meals a day along with snacks, their chance of becoming overweight is increased. By reducing the amount of juice offered, participants may be encouraged to drink less juice and more water. To increase the vitamin level and increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables, fresh, frozen or canned fruits and vegetables should be offered. These foods can also be used as a healthy snack food for children instead of some of the high sugar, high fat alternatives
 6. Are there concerns that affect foods issued through WIC that need to be addressed?
 - Food allergies need to be addressed. Besides a parent having to take the time to modify meals to accommodate the food allergy, special foods may have to be purchased for the person with the allergy. For example, a person with an allergy to lactose has to purchase lactose free milk as opposed to regular cow's milk. These special foods can be more of a financial burden on the family. With WIC participants being members of low income families, the financial burden could be exceptionally great. In order to accommodate this, there should be ready substitutions for those foods on WIC shown to be common allergens. These food substitutions can be provided to the participant as a substitution for the food to which they are allergic when the allergy is confirmed by a doctor.

7. What data should be considered when making decisions about the WIC food packages?
- Nutrition Content and Scientific Studies – The program focuses on giving children the best start possible through good nutrition practices that will hopefully remain throughout life. In order to maximize this, nutritious foods that meet the needs of the participants should be offered in the program. In order to determine which nutrients are most important for this group, current scientific research should be examined. The main topic to cover is nutrient deficiencies that occur during pregnancy, infancy and childhood and subsequent health effects in low income populations. With the rise in overweight being contrary to Healthy People 2010, another possible research area to explore is food and obesity prevention among children.
 - Participant surveys – The participants need to be surveyed. Their opinions are necessary when determining what to keep the same and any changes to be made to the food package. As the people who use the food, they can best determine what they will use if made available and what is currently going to waste in the present food packages.
 - The cost of the foods must be taken into account. The reality is that all food costs money, some more than others. The goal is to provide the foods with the most nutrients needed by the participants at a reasonable price in order to be able to serve the greatest number of people.
8. Should participants be allowed greater flexibility in choosing foods?
- Given the diverse nature of cultures, races and ages, the participants should be allowed greater flexibility in choosing their foods. For example, if there is a family from a different culture that does not cook with or eat cheese, they should be able to substitute the cheese for another food they will use such as yogurt or tofu. They should also continue to have the flexibility to choose foods within a food category. They currently can choose from a wide variety of cereals, juices and cheeses. This variety should also be offered with yogurt flavors, fruits and vegetables. Allowing a person more flexibility to buy foods that the participant will eat will help decrease the amount of food that is wasted.
 - The amount of flexibility the participants are given must be carefully analyzed. While the participant should be given some flexibility in their food choices, they should not be given so many that it becomes overly confusing for either them or the vendors. In order to achieve this, the broad categories should be established with choices within each selection. Substitutions that are allowed should be very clear and preferably done with the client while in the clinic so the checks only list the specific foods they have chosen as opposed to giving the choices on the food vouchers.
9. How can WIC food packages be designed to meet nutritional needs of ethnically and culturally diverse communities?
- In order to determine appropriate foods, cultural experts and nutrition experts need to be consulted to determine which WIC foods currently are not culturally friendly (not used by different cultures) and possible foods used within the cultures that can serve as a substitution while meeting the nutritional goals of WIC. For example, in many Asian and Middle Eastern cultures rice is a staple. By allowing enriched rice to be used instead of cereal, the nutritional needs would be met by providing a

food with the appropriate nutrients that these cultures will use. Also, allowing a wide variety of fruits and vegetables that are acceptable so those cultures that rely on these foods could choose the ones relevant to them.

10. Should WIC State Agency be given more or less flexibility in designing food packages?
 - Each state has a different set of nutrition problems such as obesity or diabetes. Due to this, each state should be given the freedom to take the foods approved by the USDA and formulate them into appropriate food packages for the participants they serve. For example, states who see a high population of overweight children and adults may want to revise the amount of high fat foods offered and substitute lower fat items for the participants.
11. Identify/recommend WIC food selection criteria, describe how the criteria interact, indicate their relative weighting or importance, and provide supporting rationale.
 - Criteria – in weighted order
 - i. Nutritional content – The primary goal is to improve the overall nutritional status of infants and children as well as pregnant, non-breastfeeding and breastfeeding women. Because of that, providing foods that provide the necessary nutrients to ensure health in these populations is key
 - ii. Cost effectiveness – This is an organization that costs money to run. Therefore every food must also be looked at for its cost. If there is an alternative that offers the same nutritional benefit at a lower cost then the alternative needs to be considered in an effort to save money
 - iii. Participant satisfaction with the food selection – If the participants do not like the food selections or are not familiar with them, they will not use the food which will undermine the purpose of WIC
 - iv. Waste reduction – Allow enough flexibility so that if the full amount of food is not going to be used, it can be removed from the food voucher, substituted with another item or the amount can be altered to eliminate wasting food and money