

Frequently Asked Questions
Local Media Release of the New WIC Foods
October 19, 2009

Q: What is WIC?

WIC is a federal supplemental food and nutrition program for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women and children under age five.

Q: When was the WIC Program started?

The WIC Program began in 1974.

Q: What does WIC provide?

WIC Program services include nutrition counseling and classes, breastfeeding promotion and support, referrals to health and social services and food checks that can be used to buy specific healthy foods.

Q: How many WIC participants are there in California?

Each month, the California WIC Program serves 1.5 million women, infants and children statewide. Sixty percent of all infants born in California participate in WIC.

Q: How many WIC participants are in our County?

[Include your agency information]

Q: Who is eligible for WIC?

WIC is available to low income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women and children under age five who are at nutritional risk and who are at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level. A family of four with a gross income of up to \$40,793 would be eligible for WIC.

Q: How does someone apply for WIC?

Contact your local WIC office to make an appointment and find out which documents you need to bring with you. At your appointment, WIC staff will check to see if you and your family qualify. To find a local WIC office, call 1-888-WIC-WORKS. You can also find a location on the internet by doing to www.wicworks.ca.gov.

Q: When did the WIC Program start offering new foods?

As of October 1, 2009, the California WIC Program expanded the diversity of nutrition foods offered to program participants. This is the first major change to the foods that WIC provides since the program began in 1974.

Q: What are the changes to the WIC foods?

WIC participants will now receive fruits and vegetables, whole wheat bread and grains and other expanded options in addition to milk, cheese, eggs and other foods that have always been offered. Participants will now be able to more easily access fresh fruits and vegetables and other items that are critical to their health and well being.

The new WIC food options emphasize reduced-fat dairy products and include tofu and soy beverage as an alternative to milk. There is also greater variety in the WIC offerings to accommodate the cultural food preferences of WIC participants.

Q: Why did the federal government change the foods that WIC offers?

In September 2003, Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) at the United States Department of Agriculture 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.

Q. Why did it take so long for USDA to change WIC foods?

WIC was originally designed to address stark hunger found in low-income households during the War on Poverty, providing high protein foods with lots of calories and nutrients like Vitamin C, calcium, and iron to prevent anemia and other deficiencies. But there have been huge changes since then, most importantly the emergence of an obesity epidemic that is disproportionately impacting low-income communities. It took time for WIC to "catch up" and then push the changes through scientific review and then policymaking process. But it was worth the wait!

Q: 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 amounts 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. A minimal amount of infant formula is provided to partially breastfeeding infants in the first month after birth if they have problems that necessitate supplementation. The mothers also receive assistance from WIC staff to overcome their breastfeeding problem.

Q: What are the nutrition messages that the new foods will support?

In preparation for the change, the California WIC Program launched a nutrition education campaign last year that has been teaching smart shopping and cooking skills to help families purchase and prepare the new food items. The campaign includes family-friendly messages such as Eat a Rainbow of Fruits and Vegetables; Make Half Your Grains Whole; and Lose the Fat, Keep the Vitamins...Drink Low-Fat Milk.

Q: Can WIC checks be used everywhere or only certain stores? How many stores take WIC checks?

WIC participants can use their federally funded WIC checks at one of the 4,700 WIC-authorized grocers statewide. The checks are valid for use for a 30 day period and are payable for a specific type and quantity of food. The retail value of the food checks is about \$60 per month per

participant. WIC purchases amount to more than \$80 million of food sales in California grocery stores each month.

TALKING POINTS FOR INTERIM WIC FOOD PACKAGE RULE developed by USDA
http://www.nal.usda.gov/wicworks/Learning_Center/FP/Talking_Points.pdf