

The WIC Program

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), a federal nutrition program, is widely recognized as an important safeguard for protecting and improving the health and nutrition of low-income mothers and children. Poor nutrition, poverty, and food insecurity have detrimental impacts on infant, child, and maternal health and well-being in the short and long terms. One critical strategy to address these issues is connecting vulnerable families to the multi-faceted benefits of WIC.

WIC's Benefits

WIC provides low-income pregnant women, postpartum mothers, infants, and children up to 5 years old with nutritious foods, nutrition education and counseling, and referrals to health care and social services. Women, infants, and children are eligible for the program if they meet the income guidelines (i.e., at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty line), or are deemed income-eligible based on participation in other programs, such as Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In addition to being income-eligible, applicants must be at nutritional risk (e.g., underweight, overweight, anemic, have poor dietary intake) as determined through a nutrition assessment conducted by a health professional.

How WIC Operates

WIC is federally funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and is operated through local clinics by state WIC agencies and Indian Nations. Food packages are prescribed to WIC participants based on nutritional needs and include a variety of foods intended to supplement their diets, not to be a full diet. WIC-authorized foods include fruits and vegetables, milk, soy milk, yogurt, cheese, tofu, eggs, vitamin C-rich juice, iron-fortified cereal, tuna, peanut butter, beans, whole-grain bread, tortillas, and rice, as well as infant formula, baby food, and infant cereal.

Local WIC agencies distribute monthly WIC food package benefits to participants by providing a WIC electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card (smart card) or as a set of paper WIC food vouchers (checks). (States are required to complete the transition from vouchers to EBT cards by the end of 2020.) Participants use the vouchers or EBT card to shop for WIC foods at authorized grocery stores and



other WIC-approved vendors. WIC guarantees a specific amount of each WIC food, with the exception of the fruit and vegetables benefit, which has a cash value. For example, participants receive a voucher for one dozen eggs, but the fruit and vegetable voucher will allow the participant to “purchase” \$11 of fruits and vegetables for women and \$9 for children per month.

Research Shows WIC's Value

A very large body of research shows that WIC is a profoundly important program with well-documented benefits for infants, children, pregnant women, and their families. Research shows that WIC improves participants' health and well-being, dietary intake, and birth and health outcomes; protects against obesity; and supports learning and development. WIC benefits are cost-effective, generating major savings in federal, state, local, and private health care, as well as special education costs. Studies demonstrate that WIC improves the food and economic security of participants by reducing food insecurity helping to alleviate poverty, and supporting economic stability.