

# Improving the WIC Experience: Recommendations for a More Valuable WIC Food Package

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## The Current State

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) was created to provide access to healthy foods for women and young children at risk of food insecurity in the 1970s and has continued to do so throughout the years. Although there are now other benefits and services offered to participants, the WIC food packages remain the primary benefit of the program. While the packages have been shown to improve participants' eating habits and reduce the risk of nutrient deficiencies, there are several areas for improvement.

In 2009, the packages were updated to more closely align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) and included fruits and vegetables, low-fat milk, and whole grain products and reduced the amounts of eggs, milk, and juice offered. Though this was a turning point in improving the health of WIC participants, the packages have not been updated since then and do not reflect the current 2020-2025 DGAs. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) report in 2017 reviewed the packages and proposed changes that would ensure participants receive more of the necessary nutrients within each food category, such as adding seafood to adult and child packages and replacing half of the juice amount with whole fruits. The report also emphasized the need for more flexibility in package sizes, substitutions within and across categories, and more options for those with specific dietary preferences. A proposed revision to the WIC food package rule is expected this year.

To understand participants' thoughts about the food packages, we held 10 online focus groups with WIC participants in North Carolina in March 2022. Each group had 4-8 participants from similar racial/ethnic backgrounds. Half of the participants lived in rural counties and half lived in urban or suburban counties. Participants were asked what they use most and least in the food package, their experience grocery shopping using WIC benefits during the pandemic, and how the package could be more useful. The information collected in this study has the potential to inform the upcoming WIC food package review and identify strategies for improving the WIC experience overall.

## Key Findings

### Food Package Changes

**Increase the Cash Value Benefit (CVB) amount for fruits and vegetables:** Many participants felt they need more than the current amount.

- *"I could definitely use more. I mean, fruits and vegetables are a large part of my diet, especially throughout the day, between meals."*
- *"They also need to think about the reality of inflation and...what we can actually get is actually smaller..."*

**Participants want to be able to receive more CVB in place of baby food for their children ages 6-12 months**

- *"So I wish that they would continue to give us the fruits and vegetable money once they turned six months...because [my child] loves fresh fruits and vegetables as well."*

**Offer options to substitute items within and across food categories:** Participants expressed the desire for more flexibility in the food package to meet their children's shifting eating habits and reduce waste.

- *"You can keep this bread and give it to someone who would actually use this bread and someone who will actually use this cereal, go ahead and just give me \$5 more for fruits and vegetables..."*

**Address the diversity of WIC participants and their varying dietary/cultural preferences**

- *"I think that it would be a positive turn for WIC to start thinking about families who have alternative diets."*
- *"...just because we are lower income does not mean that, you know, we all eat the same..."*





## Food Package Changes, Continued

### Offer a variety of package sizes for more flexibility and to address shortages

- *"Some of the items like the juicy juice that we used to get, I've seen that they change the size of it....it's never in stock."*
- *"...to just have [the 32 ounce yogurt] in like maybe the smaller sizes just because after you open that big yogurt like it has only so much time that you can still use it versus like the smaller cup yogurt are more like for a portion for a child."*

### Consider adding seafood to all child and adult packages

- *"I don't like the fact that they took away getting tuna...They were saying that that was good for breastfeeding moms...and it's like, that's not on there [the list of approved foods]."*

### Increase the monthly allowance of eggs

- *"...a dozen eggs gets you through 12 days if you cook one egg a day...so if you was able to get two dozen eggs instead of just one that might have been a little bit more [helpful]."*

## Food Package Administration

- **Allow unused benefits to roll over for at least one month:** Participants stated allowing WIC benefits to roll over would better meet their needs because of their children's shifting preferences and it would reduce the negative effects of food shortages.
  - *"I wish that a lot of the stuff would roll over...my child doesn't eat [eggs] all the time. And then she turns around, and she scarfs 'em down..."*
  - *"But at least give us an extra month or something like a grace period to use it too because...sometimes stuff is out of stock I have to go around to different stores to find it."*
- **Extend pandemic-related flexibilities:** Federal waivers extended the list of WIC approved foods which helped participants use their benefits amidst shortages.
  - *"But recently, during the shortages, a lot of this stuff is out of stock and I'll go to multiple stores and I can't find the organic skim milk, it's always out. So when they loosened the restrictions up a little bit and let us choose like a 2% option that helped tremendously."*
- **Update technologies to improve the grocery shopping experience:** Many participants expressed the desire to use their benefits at self-checkout and for online grocery shopping, especially during the pandemic.
  - *"...online you can't really use WIC...So it was more risky for me to go inside and get the groceries. But like I couldn't really you know stand in the aisle and ponder...I really had to like grab and go."*
  - *"I finished my [overnight] shift at six in the morning, and when I go to Food Lion there no registers open. It's just self checkout. And so I have to like find somebody to open a register just to get my WIC stuff for the kids for breakfast or something. So yeah, being able to use self checkout would be really nice."*
- **Continue the use of remote appointments:** Participants mentioned that it was easier to stay enrolled in WIC due to remote appointments during the pandemic.
  - *"The appointments are easier with the phone call....It's way easier and I feel like it's almost accustomed to moms, because we do have a busy schedule."*

Read more at [go.unc.edu/cvbstudy](https://go.unc.edu/cvbstudy)

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