



Participant Recommendations for Improving the WIC Food Package: Evaluating Data from the 2021 Multi-State Participant Satisfaction Survey

Research Brief • February 2023

THE CURRENT STATE

Since 1974, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides low-income women and children with access to healthy foods. The WIC food packages are designed to provide supplemental foods to meet the nutritional needs of pregnant and postpartum women and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk.

In 2009, important revisions were made to the food package to better align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs). This significantly improved the nutritional outcomes of WIC participants at the time but is no longer up to date with current recommendations from the 2020-2025 DGAs. Temporary food package changes were introduced in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as waivers for food package substitutions and an increase in the cash value benefit (CVB) to purchase fruits and vegetables.



OUR STUDY

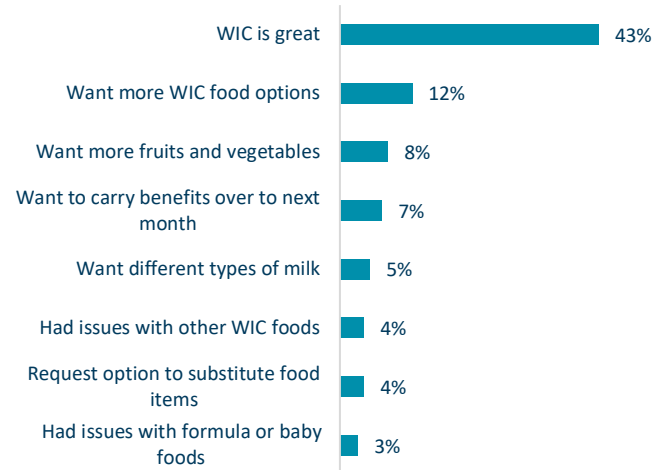
The 2021 Multi-State WIC Participant Satisfaction Survey (MSS) evaluated participants' experiences and satisfaction with interactions and appointments with WIC, shopping for WIC foods, and using the WIC Card and App during the COVID-19 pandemic to inform future policy and operational decisions.¹

The survey was administered by 12 WIC state agencies with a total of 26,642 participants. It included an open-ended question which asked participants to share any feedback about their WIC experience. We received 7,831 responses (in English and Spanish) to the open-ended question, which were coded into themes.

KEY FINDINGS: Suggestions for Revision of WIC Food Package

Of 7,831 respondents, 43% indicated overall satisfaction with WIC.

Key Themes from 7,831 WIC Participants



The most common feedback was about wanting greater flexibility and personalization of the food package:

- 12% wanted more food options and 8% wanted more fruits and vegetables.
- Of 402 respondents (5%) who wanted different types of milk, 37% specified wanting dairy alternatives (e.g., almond, oat).
- Of 288 respondents (4%) who expressed a desire for food substitutions:
 - 20% wanted to substitute jarred baby foods
 - 26% wanted to substitute juice for more CVB to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables
- Other food substitutions requested included wanting vegetarian options, foods for those with food allergies, and options that align with different religious preferences.

Additionally, 7% expressed a desire for their unused benefits to carry over to the next month.

Participants also highlighted specific challenges with the shopping experience, with 39% reporting difficulty finding appropriate sizes for specific approved foods, such as bread and yogurt.



Participants would like to receive a higher amount for fruits and vegetables:

- *“I believe that adding more funding for the fruit and vegetable benefits is necessary. In order to promote meeting nutritional values, the amount of benefits allotted are far too little.”*
- *“I would love to get a larger fruit and vegetable voucher. My child eats fruit and veggies every day. It would really help to increase the voucher!”*

Participants want to substitute jarred baby foods for fresh fruits & vegetables:

- *“It would be beneficial to have the option to opt out of getting commercial baby foods and having the produce allowance higher; that way, we can offer more fresh fruits and veggies to our infant.”*
- *“For mothers with children younger than one year that begin to eat, you should provide an option of fruits and vegetables because the baby food usually have a lot of sugar.” – Spanish-preferring WIC participant*

Participants would like to substitute juice for whole fruits & vegetables:

- *“I wish we could opt out of certain categories to increase our produce budget, I don't want or need juice and the dentist doesn't recommend it but \$9 in produce doesn't get us much.”*
- *“I would like for the juices to be eliminated for their high sugar content and for more money to be added for fruits and vegetables.” – Spanish-preferring WIC participant*

Participants want additional and appropriate package sizes for food items:

- *“Some of the things they said I could buy in the packet I got, I can't actually purchase. 48 oz juice doesn't exist at Walmart. 16 oz bread makes like 5 sandwiches. The quantities make no sense.”*

Participants would like to have more culturally relevant foods:

- *“Not all WIC families eat typical American food. Please consider altering the program to include families with different backgrounds and eating cultures.”*

Participants with food allergies want foods that meet their dietary needs:

- *“There are people that are allergic to soy, dairy, and gluten that like myself we are getting less food cause there's no other options for us please keep in mind of people's food allergies.”*
- *“Need WAY more money for veggies, less grains and dairy. We have allergies, so many of your WIC foods include the 8 common allergens.”*

Participants would like dairy alternatives:

- *“I think it would be very helpful if WIC offered more dairy free options, as I am lactose intolerant and would like the option to get dairy free yogurt or cheese and more options of dairy free milk.”*
- *“My son is limited on what alternative milk products he can drink. WIC provides soy milk but not nut or oat milks that he could use.”*
- *“My daughter is milk/soy protein intolerant. We can't use the milk, cheese, or yogurt for her. Offering more fruits and veggies or oat milk/almond milk/coconut milk would really help, even if less.”*

Participants want their unused benefits to carry over to the next month:

- *“I recommend allowing unused WIC benefits to rollover. Some participants don't have all the resources to keep perishable foods from spoiling.”*
- *“I would like it if the benefits could roll over from month to month quarterly. Sometimes between inclement weather, sicknesses and transportation issues, it is a very difficult decision.”*

Recommendations

The findings from this qualitative evaluation can inform the upcoming WIC food package revision and improve the food package offerings for mothers and their children. Most WIC participants who provided open-ended responses on the Multi-State Survey were appreciative of the program. However, increasing the options in the WIC food package was a common theme. Increasing the WIC cash value benefit (CVB) amount and allowing substitutions (e.g., less jarred baby food or juice) in exchange for the ability to purchase more fresh fruits and vegetables was the most frequent request.

References: [1] Ritchie L, Lee DL, Sallack L, Chauvenet C, Machell G, Kim L, Song L, Whaley SE. [Multi-state WIC Participants Satisfaction Survey: Learning from Program Adaptations During COVID](#). Funded by the National WIC Association, UC ANR Nutrition Policy Institute, Pepperdine University, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. December 2021. Photo credits: Siri Oaklander.

Suggested citation: Underwood G, Lee DL, Chauvenet C, Ritchie LD, Kim L. [Research Brief: Participant Recommendations for Improving the WIC Food Package, Evaluating Data from the 2021 Multi-State Participant Satisfaction Survey](#). Nutrition Policy Institute, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Pepperdine University, and the National WIC Association. 15 February 2023.

Acknowledgements: Pepperdine students Amanda Kiang, Claire Burton, and Lindsey Smith for their support coding participant responses.