

U.S. Department of Agriculture Revises WIC Food Packages to Include Healthier Options

But Packages Fall Short of Experts' Recommendations

Take Action on the Local, State, and Federal Levels

Women and children enrolled in the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) will soon have the option to choose healthier and culturally sensitive foods. The Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued an interim rule revising WIC food packages to include fruits and vegetables and whole grain bread (with the option to substitute whole grain tortillas, rice, or other grains) and the option of soymilk or tofu. This interim rule is the first comprehensive revision of the WIC food package since 1980 and seeks to offer participants a broader variety of food options and accommodate participants with cultural food preferences.

The interim rule is effective February 4, 2008, and states must implement its provisions no later than August 5, 2009. To influence the outcome of the final rule, submit written comments on the interim rule to FNS via Internet or mail, postmarked on or before February 1, 2010. A final rule should be published after that date.

Congress established WIC in the early 1970s to meet the nutritional needs of low-income pregnant, breast-feeding and non-breast-feeding postpartum women, infants, and children who are up to 5 years of age and at nutritional risk. WIC is a federally funded program administered by the USDA through state and local agencies, with 2,000 local agencies currently serving WIC clients. Since its inception, WIC has increased from 88,000 in 1974 to 8,285,000 today the number of women, infants, and children for whom it provides each month.

Fundamental to the nutrition and health for thousands of low-income women and children, WIC provides essential vitamins and nutrients for those at nutritional risk. WIC provides nutrition education, breast-feeding instruction, counseling at WIC clinics, health screenings, and referrals to health clinics and social service agencies. The following benefits have been attributed to WIC:

- Decreased infant mortality rate among Medicaid recipients
- Decreased neonatal mortality
- Decreased probability of low birth weight
- Decreased incidence of iron deficiency in low-income children

- Healthy eating habits among pregnant, breast-feeding, and non-breast-feeding postpartum women and youth
- Increased number of women receiving prenatal care
- Increased participation among pregnant women and families in the broader health care system (i.e., social services, prenatal care, infant care)

Under the interim rule, women will receive \$8 and children will receive \$6 in fruit and vegetable vouchers each month, falling \$2 short of the National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine's recommendation for women and children (see Institute of Medicine, National Academy of Sciences, *WIC Food Packages: Time for a Change* (2005), available at [www.fns.usda.gov/oane/menu/Published/WIC/FILES/Time4AChange\(mainrpt\).pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/menu/Published/WIC/FILES/Time4AChange(mainrpt).pdf)). However, the small number of women exclusively breast-feeding will receive \$10 in fruit and vegetable vouchers. Although the interim rule will allow WIC participants greater flexibility when purchasing groceries, specifically fruits and vegetables, the revision will decrease the quantity of the items already in the food packages. For instance, the revision decreases the amount of formula that an infant may receive in the infant food package and adds an infant food provision to the infant package. Other decreases in food quantities vary with the food package. For a summary of the rules for fruits and vegetables in the new WIC packages prepared by the Food Research Action Center (FRAC), see http://www.frac.org/pdf/WIC_fruitandvegetable.pdf.

During the 18 months that states have to prepare and implement the new WIC food packages, the state and local agencies implementing the changes must be aware of the needs of women, infants, and children participating in WIC. State WIC advisory councils are essential in bringing stakeholders together to engage in the planning and implementation of the WIC revision. If you would like to get involved in a WIC advisory council and help protect the rights of women, infants, and children, contact Diane M. Doherty, executive director, Illinois Hunger Coalition, at 312.629.9580 or via email at dianedihc@aol.com.

To find out more about WIC, contact the WIC state or local agency serving your area or call toll-free 1.800.323.4769 to locate an agency near you. Additional information regarding eligibility, participation, and other WIC-related material can be found at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Services' website at www.fns.usda.gov/wic/ or at the Food Research Action Center's website at <http://www.frac.org/>. The interim rule is published in the *Federal Register*—72 Fed. Reg. 68965 (interim rule Dec. 6, 2007)—and can be found at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/Federal-Register/2007/120607.pdf>. This interim rule has complete information on the submission of written comments to FNS.

For more information, contact Wendy Pollack, director, Women's Law and Policy Project, Shriver Center, at 312.263.3830 ext. 238 or via email at wendypollack@povertylaw.org.