

January 2017

## Review of WIC Food Packages

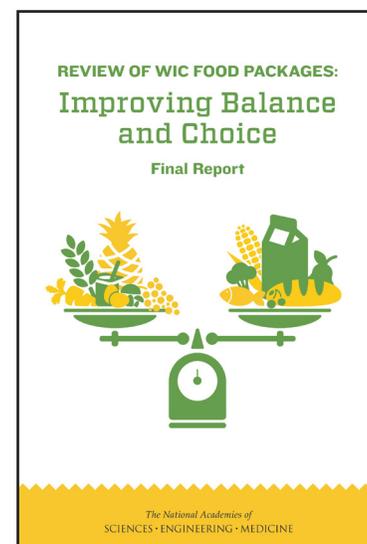
### Improving Balance and Choice: Final Report

Among the nutrition assistance programs available to low-income families, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is the only one that specifically targets the nutritional needs of pregnant, breastfeeding, or postpartum women; infants; and children less than 5 years of age. WIC also includes nutritional assessment, nutrition education, and referrals to health and social services, in addition to a prescribed food package.

Since 1974, the program's goals have evolved to include better supporting breastfeeding by providing the breastfeeding mother with benefits for up to 1 year; providing WIC participants with a wider variety of foods, including vegetables, fruits, and whole grains; and providing WIC state agencies greater flexibility in prescribing food packages to accommodate the food preferences of WIC participants. As an outcome of recommendations made by the Institute of Medicine in 2006,<sup>1</sup> the program has been aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA), and the goals of the WIC program align with two major Healthy People 2020 goals and nearly 30 health objectives, specifically related to birth weight, childhood and adult weight, and breastfeeding prevalence. Congress has now mandated that an evaluation of the WIC food packages must occur every 10 years.

With support from the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine convened an expert committee to review and assess the nutritional status and food and nutritional needs of the WIC-eligible population and provide specific recommendations based on its review and grounded in the most recently available science. The committee produced three reports, including *Evaluation of White Potatoes in the Cash Value Voucher: Letter Report*, recommending that white potatoes be allowed for purchase with the cash value voucher (CVV), and *Review of WIC Food Packages: Proposed Framework for Revisions: Interim Report*, presenting the evidence, analyses, and framework to be applied to develop the committee's recommendations. In this third report, the committee provides its final analyses, recommendations, and the supporting rationale.

<sup>1</sup>As of March 2016, the Health and Medicine Division continues the consensus studies and convening activities previously undertaken by the Institute of Medicine (IOM).



**The report provides a review and assessment of the nutritional status and food and nutritional needs of the WIC-eligible population and provides specific recommendations based on the review and grounded in the most recently available science.**

## THE REVISED FOOD PACKAGES

The committee developed a set of criteria for inclusion of foods in the food packages (see Box, below). Noteworthy among these is the concept that the packages should provide a balanced supplement to participants' diets.

The revised food packages meet all of the specified criteria, including providing supplemental amounts of most food groups, providing at least 50 percent of most priority nutrients, aligning with the most up-to-date DGA, increasing the flexibility of the packages to better support any breastfeeding in the first month, enhancing options to meet cultural needs, and considering WIC agency and vendor burdens.

The committee's proposed revisions to the food packages are designed to contribute positively to dietary quality of WIC-participating women, infants, and children. Most aspects of the current food packages are unchanged in the

proposed new packages. However, a few foods have been added or amounts adjusted to enhance the quality of the packages. To meet the requirement of maintaining cost neutrality, amounts of some foods were decreased, primarily those that were provided in excess of recommended amounts or that were poorly redeemed. Overall, the proposed packages provide better adherence to the DGA and further increase flexibility and choice.

The proposed food packages can be seen in Table 6-1 (food packages for formula-feeding, partially breastfeeding, and fully breastfeeding mother-infant dyads) and Table 6-2 (food packages for children and for pregnant women). To see the full content of the proposed food packages, please visit the Report at a Glance section of the report's web page at [nationalacademies.org/WICfoodpackages](https://nationalacademies.org/WICfoodpackages).

### **BOX: CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION OF FOODS IN THE WIC FOOD PACKAGES**

1. The packages provide a balanced supplement to the diets of women and children.
2. The packages contribute to reduction of the prevalence of inadequate nutrient intakes and of excessive nutrient intakes.
3. The packages contribute to an overall dietary pattern that is consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans for individuals 2 years of age and older.
4. The packages contribute to an overall diet that is consistent with established dietary recommendations for infants and children less than 2 years of age, including encouragement of and support for breastfeeding.
5. The foods in the packages are available in forms and amounts suitable for low-income persons who may have limited transportation options, storage, and cooking facilities.
6. The foods in the packages are readily acceptable, commonly consumed, are widely available, take into account cultural food preferences, and provide incentives for families to participate in the WIC program.
7. The foods in the packages do not create an undue burden on state agencies or vendors.

**The revisions to the food packages are expected to improve both the attractiveness of the program to participants and its success in meeting the WIC program’s goals; to promote and support breastfeeding; and to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children.**

## **SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

The committee recommended revisions to the WIC food packages that improve alignment with the DGA and are more consistent with nutrition standards of other nutrition assistance programs. The committee targeted several primary areas: amounts of foods provided, nutritional specifications for foods, and additional substitution options for some foods. In addition, a focus of the committee was to enhance the food package composition and flexibility for women who choose to breastfeed.

To improve balance among food groups, foods (including vegetables and fruits purchased with the CVV) that are currently provided in lower amounts or were consumed less adequately (e.g., whole grains, vegetables, fruits, and seafood) are increased. Most foods that are currently provided in greater-than-supplemental amounts are reduced (e.g., juice, dairy, peanut butter, legumes, and infant foods).

Food specifications are adjusted to increase the provision of whole grains (all breakfast cereals must meet the whole grain–rich criteria, all bread must be 100 percent whole wheat) and reduce the contribution of added sugars from foods that can substitute for milk (e.g., yogurt, soy beverage).

The food choices allowed in the 2009 food package revisions are retained, and additional choices are added (e.g., an option to select a CVV in place of jarred infant food vegetables or fruits, or in place of juice; an option to substitute some fish in place of some jarred infant food meats; an additional quart of yogurt as a substitution for milk; additional grain choices; and other options for vegan participants). The committee anticipates no increase in the administrative burden of these changes because the recommended revisions build on the 2009 food package updates.

To support evaluation of the revised packages and the next 10-year review, the committee also identifies research gaps and outlines recommendations for implementation of the revised food packages, including development of tools and

strategies to assist state and local agencies to support best use of the expanded options of the revised food packages. To be fully effective, the revisions to the food package should be accompanied by the committee’s implementation recommendations.

To read the full text of the committee’s overarching recommendations, please see the Recommendations insert.

## **CONCLUSION**

The revisions to the food packages are expected to improve both the attractiveness of the program to participants and its success in meeting the WIC program’s goals; to promote and support breastfeeding; and to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children. The committee urges that future WIC review committees continue to prioritize support for breastfeeding, encouragement of vegetable consumption, and availability and usage of WIC data.

**To read the full report, please visit [nationalacademies.org/WICfoodpackages](https://www.nationalacademies.org/WICfoodpackages).**

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