

# THE SPECIAL SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION PROGRAM FOR WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN (WIC)

Supplemental food packages are one component of a suite of nutrition and health services offered to nutritionally at-risk, low-income women, infants, and children through the WIC program. By law, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is required to review the latest scientific evidence and update the WIC food packages, as needed, at least every 10 years [1].

## WHAT NUTRITION IN DEMAND IS TRACKING

### *2024 Food Package Updates*

The USDA updated the WIC food packages to better align with the latest nutrition science, guided by:

- The 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans;
- Findings from a 2017 National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine report;
- The 2021 joint U.S. Food and Drug Administration and Environmental Protection Agency recommendations about fish consumption; and
- Nearly 1,800 unique public comments [1].

These changes included:

- Substantial increases to the fruit and vegetable benefits;
- Authorization for states to approve nut and seed butters as a replacement for eggs and/or peanut butter;
- Greater flexibility and more options for dairy and dairy alternative products; and
- Expansion of whole grain options to better align with individual and cultural preferences, among others [1,2].



## PARTNER WITH US!

Nutrition In Demand has extensive experience working with food commodities and manufacturers to lead evidence-based engagement and education with USDA and state WIC agencies. Contact us at [info@nutritionindemand.com](mailto:info@nutritionindemand.com) to learn more about opportunities for your organization.

### *Timing and Implementation*

Changes are likely to be gradual. While WIC funding and oversight is led by USDA, the program is implemented by state WIC agencies, which now have up to two years\* to implement these updates (from June 2024). Some of the food package updates are required for all states, while others are only recommendations or “flexibilities” offered to states. Therefore, states have substantial decision-making power over what foods—including food brands and package sizes—will be available for purchase by WIC-eligible individuals and families on their state’s Approved Product List (APL) [1,2].

## POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FOOD INDUSTRY

By offering greater flexibility and variety in the foods offered, the updated WIC food packages align with government efforts to better reflect Americans’ eating behaviors and personal and cultural preferences. Food commodities and manufacturers can help support this vulnerable population by providing state WIC agencies with evidence-based information to inform their adoption of food package updates.

\*Exceptions include that 1) increased cash-value benefits for fruits and vegetables must be implemented within 60 days, and 2) vitamin D specifications for yogurt must be implemented within 36 months from June 2024.







## PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Opportunities can include:

- Using data, such as state participation and redemption rates as well as demographics, to strategically prioritize outreach to state WIC agencies;
- Educating state WIC agency leadership on the nutritional profiles and science-based benefits of specific foods and products that align with recent WIC food package updates; and
- Providing consumer-relevant, evidence-based resources to state WIC agency teams to support their efforts to educate eligible families and individuals on APL updates.

## BACKGROUND ON WIC

### PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

For five decades, the USDA WIC Program has protected and improved the health and nutrition of low-income, nutritionally at-risk women, infants, and children up to age 5. This federal nutrition assistance program now serves **more than 6.6 million women, infants, and children** each month in all 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, 33 Indian Tribal Organizations, and 5 U.S. territories [3].

WIC supports participants through a suite of nutrition and health services that includes:

- Specialized, supplemental monthly food packages;
- Nutrition and breastfeeding education and counseling; and
- Screenings and referrals for health, social, and welfare services, as needed.

The supplemental WIC food packages build upon participants' existing diets to help meet nutrient needs and support growth and development. These benefits are distributed through electronic benefits transfer (EBT) cards that can be used to shop for WIC foods through authorized vendors [3]. The packages are “prescribed” based on the age of the child and pregnancy or breastfeeding status of the mother.

### PROVEN IMPACTS

WIC has a well-documented track record of improving participants' health and nutrition status and health-related outcomes in a cost-effective manner. Among pregnant women and infants, WIC leads to earlier access to prenatal care, longer pregnancy duration, fewer infant deaths, improved infant health outcomes, and lower health care costs in an infant's first 60 days [4]. Studies also show that WIC improves infant feeding practices and immunization rates and improves children's diets, growth rates, access to regular medical care, and diet-related health outcomes [4].

However, **millions of eligible individuals and families do not yet access WIC services** – elevating the need for private sector support and collaboration with state WIC agencies to help improve education and reach within their communities.

#### References

1. USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). Changes to the WIC Food Packages Q&A. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/food-packages/qas>.
2. USDA FNS. WIC Food Packages. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/food-packages>.
3. USDA FNS. WIC Fact Sheet. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/wic-fact-sheet>.
4. USDA FNS. About WIC: How WIC Helps. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/about-wic-how-wic-helps>.