

How to Change the WIC Food Package?

An invitation from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) for ideas on how to change WIC food packages has drawn mixed responses from two national organizations.

The National WIC Association (NWA), formerly known as the National Association of WIC Directors, is calling for major changes so that the WIC food packages “help participants establish dietary patterns that promote life-long good nutritional health.” NWA wants WIC food prescriptions to be built around all the groups of the Food Guide Pyramid. This would enable participants to buy a greater variety of foods with their WIC coupons. Food generally not available through WIC, such as whole grain bread, enriched rice, pasta, bean/peas and fruits and vegetables, would be added. So would yogurt and soymilk.

To make room for these additional foods and to keep the total cost from increasing, NWA would reduce the size of the children’s food package. Quantities of milk, cheese and protein-rich foods (items such as eggs and peanut butter) would be cut. NWA also would eliminate juice from the infant food package and reduce the quantity of juice in children’s packages.

Finally, NWA would give states unprecedented flexibility to make adjustments in the food packages based on cultural preferences, the participant’s skills and preferences and the individualized WIC nutrition education plan.

The Food Research Action Center (FRAC), the leading anti-hunger advocacy group in Washington, recommends only modest changes. In a sign-on letter posted at its website, FRAC emphasizes the effectiveness of the existing food packages. While calling for an expansion of cultural food package options, the addition of high-calcium yogurt and soymilk, and the addition a whole new category for fruits and vegetables, FRAC urges FNS not to add bread, rice and pasta. “These (are) low-cost foods that are consumed as staples and would be purchased and consumed regardless of availability from WIC. This kind of addition is unlikely to have a positive impact on the health or nutritional status of WIC clients.”

FRAC also opposes cuts in the quantity of food in the children’s package. “Less WIC food for these young children will result in more non-WIC foods, which all too often includes junk food.” Moreover, FRAC asserts less food in the children’s package will undermine a key incentive that encourages parents to keep their children enrolled in WIC until age five. “If parents decide not to enroll their children because the food package is too small to be worth the effort, then the children can’t reap any of the Program’s benefits.”

Finally, FRAC would expand flexibility to accommodate cultural preferences on a “food-package to food-package basis.” This would ensure that each participant received a package of relatively equal nutritional and economic value.

The requirements for WIC food packages were last revised in 1980. In its request for public comment, FNS stated: “While WIC has been successful in many areas, obesity and inappropriate dietary patterns have become significant concerns for many.” Moreover, it noted that recommended dietary practices are constantly evolving in response to new research. Finally, FNS cautioned that “food package recommendations should not increase the cost of the WIC Program nor change the supplemental nature of the Program.”