

WIC INFANTS GET NEW TASTES: JARRED FRUITS AND VEGETABLES



The Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), serving more than half of all infants born in the United States, can profoundly influence critical behaviors that prevent childhood obesity: healthy pregnancy weight gain, exclusive breastfeeding, later introduction of juice and complementary foods, and provision of varied tastes and textures as first foods.¹ The inclusion of checks for commercial baby foods in WIC packages has been well accepted by WIC participants. As their infants age, however, most would prefer checks for fruits and vegetables to make their own baby foods.

WIC Packages Expand to Include Baby Foods

During 2009, USDA and WIC programs across the country implemented historic changes designed to align the WIC food package with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The changes promote healthier food choices to millions of WIC families and will help lower the risk of obesity and its consequences that these families face. Among other changes recommended by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) was the inclusion of commercial baby-food fruits and vegetables as well as fresh bananas in WIC food packages for infants, beginning at six months of age.² Infant juices were completely eliminated from the food package, while iron-fortified infant cereals remained.

The IOM reasoned that jarred baby foods would be developmentally appropriate, consumed specifically by infants as intended, and be compatible with food safety concerns for young children.³ To encourage and promote breastfeeding, the IOM Committee also recommended, for fully breastfed infants (those receiving no formula), more generous amounts of baby food, and it added baby-food pureed meats to improve intake of zinc and iron in this subgroup.⁴ Infants being fed formula or a combination of formula and breast milk receive 112 total ounces of jarred baby food fruits and vegetables a month, while fully breastfeeding infants receive about 240 ounces a month in jars of baby-food fruits and vegetables plus about 77 ounces of jarred baby-food meats. All infants over six months old receive four bananas a month.

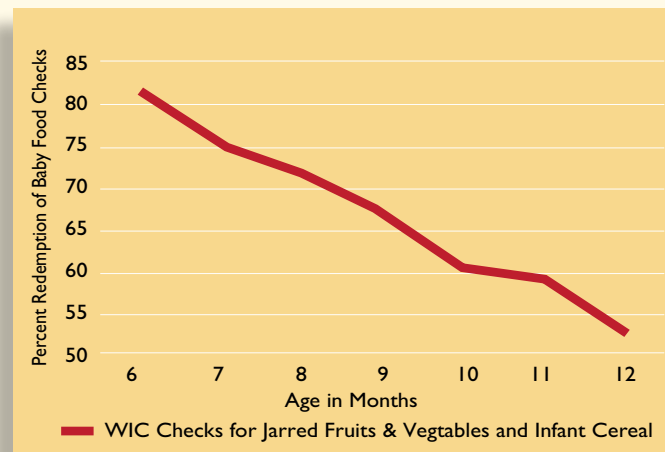
Study Shows WIC Parents Like the Baby Food, But Want More Flexibility

To understand participant use of and satisfaction with the baby foods, a study of the impact of the new WIC food package included questions about WIC participant satisfaction with new WIC checks for jarred baby food and checks for fruits and vegetables.⁵ Researchers surveyed a representative, random sample of approximately 3,000 California WIC participants by telephone. They also analyzed California redemption data for checks for jarred baby food and interviewed WIC participants and nutrition staff.

Researchers found that nearly 84 percent of WIC participants surveyed were “very satisfied” with the new checks for baby foods, with no significant differences among ethnic groups. However, when asked, “If you had a choice of either continuing to receive WIC checks for jarred baby food or receiving a \$6 to \$8 check to buy fruits and vegetables for your baby, which would you choose?” 66 percent of the participants said they would prefer to have checks for fruits and vegetables (as they do for children over age one). Of these, more than two-thirds were Latinos and about half were African Americans and Caucasians. As babies get older, this preference grows even stronger. Among participants whose infants were between nine and eleven months old, nearly 80 percent across all ethnic groups would prefer checks for fruits and vegetables instead of jarred baby foods.

Statewide WIC check-redemption data corroborated participants’ reports. As infants get older, WIC families purchase less baby food, from a high redemption rate of 80 percent among families whose children were six to seven months old when the checks were first offered to less than 60 percent redemption by the time those children reached 10 to 12 months of age (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. As Infants Get Older, WIC Families Purchase Less Jarred Baby Food



The low redemption rate for checks for jarred baby food suggests that infants could be receiving significantly more nutrients if their families could buy more fresh fruits and vegetables with which to prepare their own baby foods.

In interviews, both WIC staff and participants reported that, although jarred baby food was convenient, the amount provided was more than families wanted. Based on interactions with their clients, WIC staff also felt that with more checks for fruits and vegetables, participants could maintain cultural baby-food practices as well as reduce waste, and they could align their feeding with WIC nutrition messages encouraging participants to use fresh fruits and vegetables.

The existing fruit and vegetable checks could be used to substitute for jarred baby food fruits and vegetables without undue administrative burden.

This change would accommodate parents' desires to offer more varied textures and tastes to growing babies, sharing diverse family and ethnic items as appropriate. As part of this substitution option, WIC families should receive quality nutrition and consumer education about proper baby-food preparation, recipes, and grinders, and important warnings about food safety and storage.⁶

ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING APPEAL AND UTILIZATION OF WIC BABY FOODS

- 1 Research should be conducted to examine redemption rates of baby-food fruits and vegetables and baby-food meats for fully breastfed infants.
- 2 USDA should allow pilot studies to explore the feasibility of allowing states to offer parents of older infants the choice of fruit and vegetable checks instead of commercial baby-food fruits and vegetables and institute the "homemade" option if the studies are successful.
- 3 If a WIC "homemade" baby food option becomes standard, USDA should treat the purchase and provision of low-cost (hand-cranked) baby-food grinders for needy families as a food cost, as it does for WIC breast pumps and pads (this equipment can be purchased with WIC Food funds as opposed to Nutrition Services & Administration funds).



WIC Is Prevention at Work

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) helps families with three main services: checks for buying healthy supplemental foods from WIC-authorized vendors, nutrition education and breastfeeding support, and help finding healthcare and other community services. Participants must meet income guidelines and be pregnant women, new mothers, infants, or children under age five. WIC operates in all 50 states plus tribal organizations and territories. In Federal Fiscal Year 2010, the program served 9.2 million participants, including more than half of all infants born in the United States. WIC is funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture through annual allocations.

In California, WIC is a program of the California Department of Public Health, which contracts with 84 local agencies—both local governments and nonprofit community organizations—that operate WIC centers in 650 locations. California is the nation's largest WIC program. About 1.45 million participants receive services each month. Most WIC families are employed, with incomes at or below 185 percent of the poverty level (currently \$40,793 for a family of four); more than half are enrolled in Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP or CalFresh), or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Low-cost, hand-cranked baby-food grinders, along with more vouchers for fresh fruits and vegetables, could increase choices for baby food—from breastfeeding to jarred foods to "homemade" mashed fresh foods.



Notes

1. Oliveira V, Frazao E. The WIC Program: Background, trends, and economic issues, 2009 Edition. Economic Research Report No. 73, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, April 2009.
2. For more information on the new WIC food packages, go to www.fns.usda.gov/wic/.
3. Institute of Medicine, Committee to Review the WIC Food Packages and Food and Nutrition Board. WIC food packages: Time for a change. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, April 2005.
4. California implemented sweeping breastfeeding policy and infant formula policy changes at the same time. These are fully discussed in the WIC Policy Brief, *Policy Changes Raise Breastfeeding Rates*.
5. Whaley SE, Ritchie LD, Spector P, Gomez J. Revised WIC food package improves diets of WIC families. *J Nutr Educ and Behav*, in press.
6. For useful WIC materials on baby food preparation, see www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Documents/NE/WIC-NE-EdMaterials-BabyFoodFortMe.pdf.



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