



WIC App Modifications Needed to Improve WIC Participants' Shopping Experience

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WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) provides supplemental food, nutrition education and referrals to over 6.7 million U.S. women, infants and children with low-income and who are at nutrition risk. WIC saves \$2.48 in public costs for every dollar spent by improving participants' health outcomes.^{1,2}

Purchases made with WIC electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards boost local economies by funneling billions of dollars into the retail sector and food systems.³⁻⁵

WIC food packages are tailored to participants' nutrition needs and were revised in June 2024 to include more fruits, vegetables and whole grains, reduced added sugars, and enhanced flexibility in food choices and package sizes.⁶ WIC transitioned from paper-checks to EBT cards by 2022 and many states offer WIC shopping guides through smartphone applications instead of paper booklets.

However, persistent shopping challenges—including difficulties finding WIC-approved foods despite guidance from the WIC app and retail shelf tags—contribute to unspent WIC benefits and may contribute to WIC participant attrition.⁷⁻¹⁰ Studies suggest only 19-74% of WIC food benefits are fully redeemed.^{5,8} In 2022, only 54% of those eligible participated in WIC.¹¹ It is crucial to improve the shopping experience to enhance WIC participants' agency and benefit utilization, especially as the updated WIC food package is being implemented.

RECOMMENDATION

Improve the WIC app to better align its information with vendor systems, improving users' ability to identify and purchase WIC-approved items efficiently.

EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THIS RECOMMENDATION

This recommendation was informed by findings from a 2023 [survey](#) of 38,621 WIC participants—81% English and 19% Spanish speakers—from 19 states, one Indian Tribal Organization, and one US territory.¹² This brief also includes results from focus groups held in April and May 2024 with 44 WIC participants from 16 states and one Indian Tribal Organization.¹³

KEY FINDINGS

Participants experience difficulties shopping for WIC foods.

Most surveyed participants (90%) reported experiencing one or more difficulties when shopping for WIC foods. The most common problem was difficulty finding WIC foods (73%). Other common issues included misalignment between items labeled WIC-approved and what could be purchased at the register (64%), not having the right WIC foods when at the register (62%), and not being able to use curbside pickup for WIC foods (31%).



"The WIC shopper app, it's really helpful, but sometimes, it will say, "Yeah, that's a WIC item." But you get to the register. And they're like, "Oh, no, it's not." "
- English-speaking WIC participant

Shoppers' top reasons for not buying all their WIC foods were running out of time and not being able to find WIC foods.

Surveyed WIC participants reported many reasons for not fully utilizing their WIC benefits. The top reasons included:

- 25% ran out of time before their benefits expired
- 18% could not find WIC foods

The WIC app helped with shopping, but improvements are needed.

Focus group participants said the WIC app generally helped improve their experience finding WIC approved items and checking out, but the approved foods in the app did not always align with what was approved for purchase at the register.

"If I didn't have the app, it would really be total chaos at checkout."
- Spanish-speaking WIC participant



"In the store, they'll have it labeled as a WIC item. But then I go to scanning in my app, and my app tells me that it's not qualified."
- English-speaking WIC participant

Participants recommend several changes to the WIC app to support full benefit redemption.

The main suggested changes to the WIC app from survey respondents included the addition of features that would help with WIC food shopping, such as food benefits expiration reminder, pre-ordering and/or curbside pickup store locator, and a scan feature to identify WIC eligibility.

2023 WIC Survey Respondents Desired App Changes



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