

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

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (the WIC Program) provides food assistance, nutrition risk screening, and related services (e.g., nutrition education and breastfeeding support) to low-income pregnant and postpartum women and their infants, as well as to low-income children up to age 5. Participants in the program must have family income at or below 185 percent of poverty, and must be judged to be nutritionally at risk. Nutrition risk is defined as detectable abnormal nutritional conditions; documented nutritionally-related medical conditions; health-impairing dietary deficiencies; or conditions that predispose people to inadequate nutrition or nutritionally related medical problems.

Beneficiaries of the WIC Program receive supplemental foods each month in the form of actual food items or, more commonly, vouchers for purchases of specific items in retail stores. The law requires that the WIC Program provide foods containing protein, iron, calcium, vitamin A, and vitamin C, and allows Federal limits on the foods that may be provided by the WIC Program. Among the items that may be included in a food package are milk, cheese, eggs, infant formula, cereals, and fruit or vegetable juices. U.S. Department of Agriculture regulations require tailored food packages that provide specified types and amounts of food appropriate for six categories of participants: (1) infants from birth to 3 months; (2) infants from 4 to 12 months; (3) women and children with special dietary needs; (4) children from 1 to 5 years of age; (5) pregnant and nursing mothers; and (6) postpartum nonnursing mothers. In addition to food benefits, recipients also must receive nutrition education and breast-feeding support (where called for).

The Federal cost of providing WIC benefits varies widely depending on the recipient and the foods included in the food package, as well as differences in retail prices (where vouchers are used), food costs (where the WIC agency buys and distributes food), and administrative costs (including the significant costs of nutrition risk screening, breastfeeding support, and nutrition education). Moreover, the program's food costs are significantly influenced by the degree to which States gain rebates from infant formula manufacturers under a requirement to pursue "cost containment" strategies; these rebates total over \$1.5 billion a year nationwide and pay for the cost of serving a significant portion of the WIC population. In fiscal year 2002, the national average Federal cost of a WIC food package (after rebates) was \$35 a month, and, for each participant, the average monthly "administrative" cost (including nutrition risk assessments and nutrition education) was about \$13.

The WIC Program has categorical, income, and nutrition risk requirements for eligibility. Only pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children under age 5 may participate. As noted above, WIC applicants must show evidence of health or nutrition risk, medically verified by a health

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professional, in order to qualify. They also must have family income below 185 percent of the most recent Federal poverty guidelines (about \$28,200 a year for a three-person family in fiscal year 2004). State WIC agencies may (but seldom do) set lower income eligibility cutoff points. Receipt of TANF, food stamps, or Medicaid assistance also can satisfy the WIC Program's income test, and States may consider pregnant women meeting the income test "presumptively" eligible until a nutritional risk evaluation is made. Drawing on a 2002 study, almost two-thirds of WIC enrollees had family income below the Federal poverty guidelines, 10 percent of WIC enrollees were cash welfare (TANF) recipients, 18 percent received food stamps, and 54 percent were covered by Medicaid.

WIC participants receive benefits for a specified period of time, and in some cases must be recertified during this period to show continuing need. Pregnant women may continue to receive benefits throughout their pregnancy and for up to 6 months after childbirth, without recertification. Nursing mothers are certified at 6-month intervals, ending with their infant's first birthday.

The WIC Program, which is federally funded but administered by State and local health agencies, does not serve all who are eligible. It is not an "entitlement" program, and participation is limited by the amount of Federal funding appropriated, whatever State supplementary funding is provided, and the extent of manufacturers' infant formula rebates. In fiscal year 2002, Federal spending was \$4.37 billion, and the program served a monthly average of 7.5 million women, infants, and children: 24 percent women, 25 percent infants, and 51 percent children. The administration's most recent estimate of the total number of persons eligible and likely to apply for WIC benefits is 7.5 million persons, although other sources suggest the number exceeds 8 million people. Table 15-WIC-1 summarizes WIC participation and Federal costs.

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TABLE 15-WIC-1--SPECIAL SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION PROGRAM
FOR WOMAN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN (WIC) PARTICIPATION AND
FEDERAL SPENDING, SELECTED FISCAL YEARS 1977-2002

[Numbers in thousands, Dollars in millions]

Fiscal Year	Participation (9 month average)				Federal spending	
	Women	Infants	Children	Total ¹	Current dollars ²	Constant 2002 dollars
1977	165.0	213.0	471.0	848.0	\$255.9	\$767.5
1980	411.0	507.0	995.0	1,913.0	724.7	1,620.5
1985	665.0	874.0	1,600.0	3,138.0	1,488.9	2,497.7
1990	1,035.0	1,412.5	2,069.4	4,516.9	2,125.9	2,955.1
1991	1,120.1	1,558.8	2,213.8	4,892.6	2,301.1	3,045.1
1992	1,221.5	1,684.1	2,505.2	5,410.8	2,566.5	3,296.9
1993	1,364.9	1,741.9	2,813.4	5,920.3	2,819.5	3,515.2
1994	1,499.2	1,786.3	3,191.7	6,477.2	3,159.8	3,838.8
1995	1,576.8	1,817.3	3,500.1	6,894.2	3,451.0	4,078.0
1996	1,648.2	1,827.3	3,712.3	7,187.8	3,688.3	4,239.8
1997	1,710.5	1,863.0	3,835.4	7,408.9	3,845.7	4,306.0
1998	1,733.3	1,882.8	3,749.2	7,365.3	3,895.8	4,292.0
1999	1,742.5	1,897.6	3,671.4	7,311.5	3,955.6	4,275.9
2000	1,750.0	1,894.2	3,554.0	7,198.1	3,976.4	4,166.0
2001	1,779.7	1,921.2	3,604.6	7,305.6	4,147.3	4,209.5
2002	1,812.2	1,928.2	3,748.2	7,488.6	4,372.3	4,372.3

¹ Details may not sum to totals due to rounding.

² Includes funding for studies, surveys, pilots, and farmers' market programs. Spending figures include adjustments for significant interyear carryovers and reflect spending by State WIC agencies derived both from current-year appropriations and prior-year amounts, adjusted for amounts carried forward into the next year.

Note-Constant dollars were calculated using the fiscal year CPI-U.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS): (1) budget justification materials prepared by the FNS for appropriations requests for fiscal years 1980-2004; and (2) monthly "Program Information Report" summaries prepared by the FNS.