



**Food Research and Action Center
New WIC Food Packages Proposed
Preliminary Summary**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued the long-awaited proposed regulations to improve the nutritional value of the WIC food packages. (The rule, *Register for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC): Revisions in the WIC Food Packages*, will be posted in the Federal Register August 7, 2006.

Since the WIC food packages were last revised in 1980, there has been an explosion of knowledge related to nutrition and health, as well as a growing obesity problem in this country. In 2005, at USDA's request, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) issued a report with recommendations for a revised set of WIC food packages based on current nutritional science and (at USDA's specific request) intended to be cost neutral. Many of the IOM proposed changes were consistent with recommendations made by FRAC and others in public comment letters and meetings as part of the review process.

USDA's proposed changes to the WIC food packages are important and beneficial. These long-awaited changes create packages that are healthier and more sensitive to the cultural needs of WIC's diverse population.

The 2005 Institute of Medicine redesign of WIC food packages was based on current nutritional science, including the Dietary Guidelines, and intended to be cost-neutral. The food packages proposed today by USDA reflect many, but not all the changes outlined by the IOM.

What was expected to be a relatively straightforward translation of the IOM's revised food packages into USDA proposed regulations became more complicated when USDA determined that the IOM packages were not cost neutral. USDA had imposed a principle of cost neutrality which now prevented it from fully implementing the WIC food packages as recommended by the IOM.

I. New WIC Food Packages Support Good Health and Good Habits

USDA's proposed WIC food packages increase participants' choices, improve the health and nutritional quality of the foods in the program, and expand cultural food options by offering fruits and vegetables, whole grain bread (with the option to substitute corn tortillas, whole grain rice or other whole grains) and the option of soymilk and tofu. In addition, the proposal includes package enhancements that will better promote breastfeeding (including by allowing canned salmon instead of tuna) and expand support for medically fragile participants.

Healthy New Foods are Added to the WIC Food Packages

- **Fruits and Vegetables**

The new food packages for women will give \$8 for fruits and vegetables each month and \$6 for children. The addition of fruit and vegetables will strengthen WIC's positive role in helping mothers and children have a healthy weight and allowing them to make healthy food choices. This will help nutritionally vulnerable children form better eating habits from an early age. For infants age 6 to 12 months, fruits and vegetables have been added in the form of baby food. Obesity and proper nutrition are a concern for all parents; the supplemental food provided through the new additions to the package can empower mothers to choose healthy foods they might not otherwise be able to afford.

USDA has proposed allowing the State agencies to authorize farmers at Farmers Markets to accept WIC vouchers for fruits and vegetables from WIC participants.

Cultural Food Options are Expanded in the WIC Food Packages

USDA added several new food options and choices to create food packages more sensitive to the needs of WIC's diverse population. In addition to allowing participants to choose the types of fruits and vegetables that will best suit their eating patterns, the proposed package also contains the following new options:

- **Soy Milk and Tofu**
Soy milk and tofu (calcium fortified) have been added as options that can be substituted for dairy products in the food package. The inclusion of soy milk and tofu provides popular high-calcium foods for WIC clients from a diversity of cultures. In addition, these foods are an important alternative for clients with milk allergies and lactose intolerance, a more common problem in the African-American and Asian population.
- **Whole Grains**
Corn tortillas, bulgur and other whole grains can be substituted for the new whole grain bread category.

Current Types of WIC Foods are Retained

- As recommended by the IOM the proposal retains basic WIC food categories: milk, cheese, eggs, fruit juice, cereal, beans/peanut butter, infant formula and (for breastfeeding women) tuna and carrots. The amounts of many of the foods (milk, cheese, eggs, fruit juice and infant formula) are reduced to provide money to pay for the new foods and, in some cases, to bring quantities more in line with current nutritional science.

II. Several Institute of Medicine Components are Eliminated or Reduced

As mentioned above, the food packages proposed today by USDA reflect many, but not all, of the changes outlined by the Institute of Medicine. USDA's application of the cost-neutrality principle wound up forcing cuts that reduced or eliminated some key Institute of Medicine recommendations including the following:

- USDA's proposal gives children only three quarters of the amount of fruit and vegetables the Institute of Medicine determined was necessary for a nutritionally sound children's WIC food package. In the IOM food package children receive \$8 in fruits and vegetables, but the USDA package only contains \$6. It is particularly important to restore the overall value of the children's food package, in order to provide the full IOM recommendation for fruits and vegetables, which was based on compelling research showing the low intakes of fruits and vegetables for young children.
- Another key Institute of Medicine recommendation, the option of offering yogurt as a calcium rich and culturally appropriate food, is not included in USDA's proposed food package.

III. Next Steps

In summary, the proposed rule makes important steps toward a healthier WIC food package, and FRAC supports the improvements in the package. We also will be seeking ways to restore the other Institute of Medicine recommendations.

We will continue to support the implementation of a healthier food package, emphasizing the importance of USDA considering the comments fully, making the necessary changes, and quickly moving forward with the process to better serve the eight million women, infants and children in the program.

To the extent possible within the rule-making process, and thereafter in the budget process, we will continue to press to make the WIC food package stronger by urging the investment of adequate resources in the program.

FRAC will produce a more detailed summary of the proposed WIC food package and a model comment letter. The rule has a 90 day comment period.

Please direct questions and comments to Geri Henchy, Food Research and Action Center, ghenchy@frac.org, (202) 986-2200, extension 3025.

Background: In 2005, at USDA's request, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) issued a report with cost-neutral recommendations for updating the WIC food package based on evolving nutritional science, including the government's revised dietary guidelines, and cultural eating patterns. Many of the IOM proposed changes were consistent with recommendations made by FRAC and others in public comment letters and meetings, including: adding fruits and vegetables, yogurt, tofu and soymilk to the food package; retaining strong nutritional standards and the current types of foods; increasing participant choices; and expanding culturally appropriate food choices.

Congress, anxious to keep the WIC food package review and revision on track, included a provision in the 2004 WIC reauthorization requiring USDA to issue a final rule updating the WIC food package within 18 months of receiving the Institute of Medicine's final report. This would require a final rule by November 2006.

The WIC food package is prescription based and intended to provide supplemental nutrition to a person's diet. In 2004, Congress enhanced the WIC foods definition by expanding it beyond addressing specific nutritional deficiencies to focus also on "foods that promote the health of the population served by the [WIC] program..., as indicated by relevant nutrition science, public health concerns, and cultural eating patterns."