

Value Enhanced Nutrition Assessment (VENA) in WIC

The First Step in Quality Nutrition Services

Executive Summary

What is VENA?

VENA is a new initiative, developed jointly by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and the National WIC Association (NWA), to improve nutrition services in the WIC Program by establishing standards for the assessment process used to determine WIC eligibility *and* to personalize nutrition education, referrals, and food package tailoring. VENA is part of the larger process known as Revitalizing Quality Nutrition Services (RQNS) in WIC.

Why is VENA Necessary?

VENA responds to recommendations made in a 2002 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, *Dietary Assessment in the WIC Program*¹. In its report, the IOM recommended that all women and children ages 2 to 5 years who meet the eligibility requirements of income, category, and residency status should also be presumed to meet the requirement of nutrition risk through the category of dietary risk based on *failure to meet Dietary Guidelines*.

The IOM made clear in its recommendation that the intent was **not** to affect the current use of other nutrition risk criteria for eligibility determination. That is, information should continue to be collected for the identification of potentially serious nutrition risk factors, such as growth issues, iron deficiency, or predisposing medical conditions related to nutrition. Such information is required for the priority placement of participants, and to provide the necessary referrals and individualize other nutrition services.

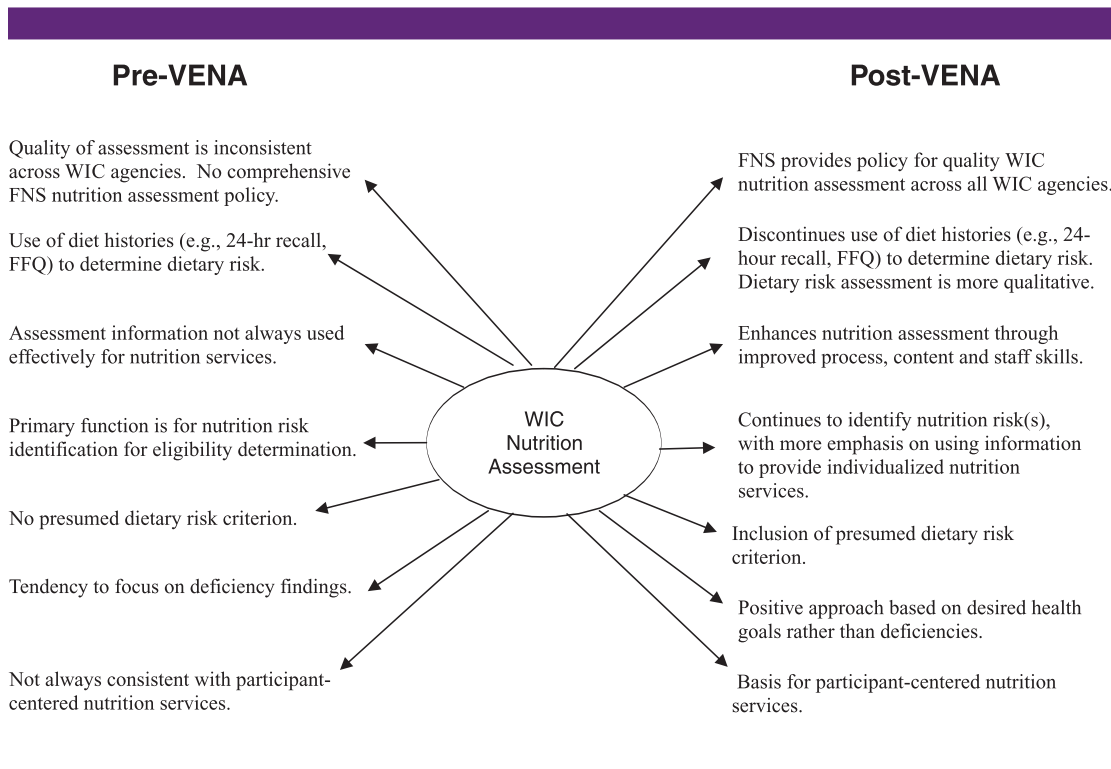
As a result of the IOM report findings and recommendation for a presumed dietary risk criterion, the FNS identified the need to develop comprehensive nutrition assessment guidance. VENA not only serves to enhance the nutrition services of the WIC Program, but also to ensure the integrity of the WIC Program as a premier public health nutrition program.

¹ Institute of Medicine; Committee on Dietary Risk Assessment in the WIC Program. *Dietary risk assessment in the WIC program*. Washington (DC): National Academy Press; 2002.



How will VENA Change Current Assessment Procedures?

The *WIC Nutrition Services Standards* (NSS)² provide a framework of nutrition assessment components to guide State agencies in establishing policy and practices. The VENA Policy and Guidance builds on the NSS and defines in more detail, the process and content of a quality WIC nutrition assessment upon which nutrition education, food package selection and referrals will be based. In addition, VENA identifies the essential staff competencies necessary to conduct an assessment. The diagram below highlights and summarizes the changes anticipated with the implementation of VENA.



What are the Anticipated Results of VENA?

The anticipated results of VENA are summarized below:

State agencies will:

- Enhance the nutrition assessment process.
- Empower staff by improving their nutrition assessment skills.
- Enjoy more satisfied staff and participants.

² U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Supplemental Food Programs Division: WIC Nutrition Services Standards, October 2001. Available from: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/benefitsandservices/nutritionservicesstds.HTM>

WIC staff members will:

- Use their limited time to collect relevant nutrition assessment information.
- Use critical thinking skills to link assessment information to a participant's individual needs and concerns.
- Plan a personalized nutrition intervention.
- Engage the participant in dialogue and goal setting.
- Weave nutrition and diet as the common thread throughout the assessment process.

WIC participants will:

- Experience a positive encounter.
- Receive information and services related to their individual needs and concerns.
- Feel involved in goal setting to improve their own health.

When will VENA be Implemented?

Implementation of VENA will be a gradual process determined by each State agency's current staffing and nutrition assessment processes. Initially, State agencies will conduct a self-evaluation of their current nutrition assessment practices to determine areas of strengths and potential areas for enhancement. A summary of the self-evaluation findings will be submitted to the FNS by December 15, 2006. The FNS will provide further guidance on the self-evaluation in a separate communiqué. Subsequently, State agencies will submit a plan for the implementation of VENA in August 2007 with their Fiscal Year 2008 State Plan submissions. The FNS expects that all State agencies will begin the use of their *value enhanced* nutrition assessment processes by Fiscal Year 2010.

