

WIC Nutrition Education Frequently Asked Questions

A. WIC State agency responsibilities

1. Is it required that my State adopt the six elements of effective nutrition education when designing WIC nutrition education contacts?

Although it is not a requirement to adopt the elements when designing WIC nutrition education, WIC regulations require that at least 2 nutrition education contacts are made available per certification period* and that nutrition education is designed to achieve the two broad nutrition education goals of: (1) emphasize the relationship between nutrition, physical activity, and health with special emphasis on the nutritional needs of pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants and children under five years of age; and (2) assist the individual who is at nutritional risk in achieving a positive change in dietary and physical activity habits, resulting in improved nutritional status and in the prevention of nutrition-related problems through optimal use of the WIC supplemental foods and other nutritious foods.

The six elements of effective nutrition education are research-based and are recommended to use when designing nutrition education to meet these goals and the related Nutrition Service Standards (NSS). Participant nutrition education interventions/contacts that contain all six elements described in the guidance may be more effective in achieving WIC nutrition education goals, improving consistency with the NSS, and meeting participant needs. The elements support the continuous program improvement process in WIC known as Revitalizing Quality Nutrition Services (RQNS).

* = During each 6-month certification period, at least 2 nutrition education contacts shall be made available. For participants certified for a period in excess of 6 months, nutrition contacts shall be available at a quarterly rate, but not necessarily taking place within each quarter.

2. Can the State agency count the use of a reinforcement (pamphlet or video) as a nutrition education contact/intervention?

No, the use of reinforcements alone without other nutrition education elements (such as but not limited to a counseling method/teaching strategy, a message, and follow-up) are not considered effective nutrition education.

3. When would FNS expect this guidance about reinforcements to be implemented at the local level?

Nutrition education enhancements and process improvements should be implemented concurrently with the State's improvement activities associated with the Value Enhanced

Nutrition Assessment (VENA) implementation, if not sooner. WIC State agencies are encouraged to strengthen and enhance their nutrition education design processes in phases during RQNS activities to facilitate a smooth transition.

4. Will a finding result during a management evaluation (ME) if it is determined that the nutrition education does not have all of the recommended elements?

No, WIC nutrition education without the six elements will be less effective and may result in an observation and recommendation during an ME. The WIC Nutrition Education Guidance is intended to assist State and local agencies in strengthening their nutrition education service component by identifying the key elements of quality nutrition education interventions/contacts that have been determined by research to be effective.

As with any management evaluation, if a WIC regulatory requirement was not met, then a finding would be noted. It is a WIC regulatory requirement that nutrition education be designed to achieve the nutrition education goals. The WIC nutrition education guidance provides technical assistance to WIC State agencies to provide quality nutrition education that is effective and designed to achieve the WIC regulatory goals for nutrition education.

5. Are the State agencies responsible for ensuring local agencies provide tailored nutrition education that is based on the participant's WIC nutrition assessment?

Yes, this is consistent with the WIC regulations, the WIC Nutrition Service Standards and VENA policy and guidance. The WIC nutrition assessment is the first step in WIC nutrition services, and lays the groundwork for nutrition education, referrals, and food package tailoring. Nutrition education is required to be appropriate and relevant to the participant's needs, and the information obtained during assessment serves as the basis for providing tailored messages.

6. When using a third party to provide WIC nutrition education contacts, what are the State or local agency's responsibilities for ensuring WIC nutrition education goals are met?

When the local WIC agency has an agreement with a third party to provide nutrition education, the local WIC agency is still responsible to ensure that the WIC nutrition education is designed to achieve the WIC regulatory goals for nutrition education and is reflected in their annual nutrition education plan. Likewise, the State agency retains responsibility to develop the nutrition education component and to monitor local agencies to ensure compliance with the WIC regulations. This can be achieved through an agreement with a third party that clearly delineates the roles and responsibilities of the entities involved, such as: staffing and training requirements; materials development; acceptable methods for delivering education; documentation; confidentiality;

expectations for oversight and monitoring; and any limitations imposed by either party. There should also be a clear understanding of whether the services are funded or in-kind, and which entity has responsibility for providing and/or funding materials and supplies.

7. Do the recommended elements apply towards any type of nutrition education contact?

Yes, the nutrition education elements should be included in any type of nutrition education contact, whether designed for a “high risk participant”, the first nutrition education contact, or a subsequent nutrition education contact. The research shows that nutrition education contacts are more effective when the recommended nutrition elements are included than in situations where the recommended elements are absent. Using the elements may also be more effecting in achieving the WIC regulatory goals and improving consistency with the WIC Nutrition Service Standards.

B. Element 1: Review WIC Nutrition Assessment

1. A WIC nutrition assessment reveals that a participant presents with many nutrition risks and issues. Is the WIC educator expected to address all of these issues in one nutrition education contact?

No, covering all topics at once could result in information overload or “dumping” and may not be effective. Identified nutrition risks should be prioritized and the number of topics addressed should be based on the assessment of the participant’s nutritional needs, individual situation, and readiness to learn and/or stage of change. (See III. Element: Select Messages, B. for additional information on this topic.)

2. Are local WIC clinics required to use the WIC nutrition assessment information when designing the nutrition education?

Yes, the nutrition assessment is the basis by which all subsequent tailored nutrition services, known as Program benefits (nutrition education, food package, and referrals to health and social services), are provided to best meet the nutrition related needs of the participant and achieve the requirements of the Program.

The WIC State agency and local agencies remain responsible for the nutrition education requirements referenced in Section 246.11 of the Federal WIC regulations including the requirement that nutrition education contacts shall be appropriate to the individual participant’s nutritional needs. This cannot be achieved unless the WIC nutrition assessment is used as the basis or foundation for personalized nutrition services.

3. Since nutrition education is required by WIC regulations to be appropriate (as determined by the WIC nutrition assessment), does this mean that participant assessment information may be shared in situations when a WIC agency has an agreement with a third party to provide nutrition education?

Not necessarily. Participant information used for the purpose of designing appropriate nutrition education may be shared when the WIC agency has a written agreement with another agency or organization to provide appropriate nutrition education. The written agreement must delineate how the confidentiality of the participant information will be protected. Please contact your Regional Office nutritionist for more details.

In addition, there are ways for a WIC agency to design the nutrition education process so that the participant's assessment information is not necessary for a third party to provide the tailored nutrition education. For example, a WIC agency may refer a participant with a specific condition to an appropriate specialized class or individualized instruction, such as a diabetes management class, which would not require the educator to have direct access to the WIC nutrition assessment.

4. What is the impact on WIC agency processes for providing nutrition education when a WIC agency has a written agreement with a third party to provide nutrition education?

The impact on processes will vary from State to State, depending mainly on how the State has designed the process of delivering nutrition education.

For example, if a WIC agency's nutrition education process includes referring participants with specific conditions to a third party for specialized nutrition education, then it is recommended that the WIC agency design the nutrition education process so that all of the recommended nutrition education elements, such as follow-up, are performed. The nutrition educator, either from WIC or the third party, may perform the follow-up. Ensuring that the recommended elements (such as follow-up) occur may also require the WIC agency to review and strengthen other related processes, such as documentation, so that follow-up may be achieved and progress towards goals may be noted.

5. Must the agreements with other agencies or organizations to provide nutrition education be in writing?

Yes, the agreements must clearly delineate each participating agency or organization's roles, responsibilities, and expectations.

C. Element 2: Select Messages

1. Does the message topic (e.g. foods high in iron) have to be repeated in each nutrition education contact?

Not necessarily. The nutrition educator uses competency skills and professional judgment to determine which messages will be most effective for each participant contact. Tailored messages should be relevant, well-received, and appropriate to the scope of WIC, sensitive to cultural norms, and in a form or manner that is easily understood by the participant with the intent of maximizing the nutrition education benefit.

The nutrition educator has the professional judgment and discretion to determine whether the message was successfully accepted by the participant, resulting in the participant's positive behavior change, a positive change in the participant's knowledge of the topic and/or other measurement of effectiveness; and to determine whether to continue with the same message or move on to another relevant message(s) *with the intent of maximizing the nutrition education benefit for the participant.*

In the example of an anemic mother, during follow-up, it is determined that the WIC mother is aware of foods high in iron and/or she has made dietary changes to improve her iron levels. The nutrition educator can provide encouragement and support for her success relating to consuming high iron foods and the next most important or relevant health issue can be addressed in the subsequent nutrition education contact.

2. Does this mean only one message can be provided per nutrition education contact?

Not necessarily. Covering all messages at once could result in information overload or “dumping” and may not be effective. However, based on the nutrition educator's professional judgment and use of competency skills required for providing nutrition education, the nutrition educator can assess whether the participant can handle simple or complex messages and single or multiple messages. The nutrition educator should take into account that each participant is unique, has cultural influences and has different abilities and different preferred learning styles [such as a visual learner, an auditory learner who prefers to hear the instructions, or a learner who prefers to read the message].

Therefore, the nutrition educator can tailor the content based on the information gathered during the WIC nutrition assessment. The nutrition educator can use competency skills, such as critical thinking, to determine which message(s) is most relevant. Messages delivered in a manner easily understood by the participant facilitate the achievement of nutrition education goals and maximize the benefits of nutrition education.

D. Element 3: Select Counseling Methods/Teaching Strategies

1. Which counseling method or teaching strategy works best in WIC?

No one counseling method fits all WIC populations, environments (i.e. rural, urban, and suburban) and clinics. WIC populations differ by race and ethnicity, education, regional location, environment, cultural norms and sensitivities, and learning styles. WIC agencies also differ in their administrative processes and staff skills. Therefore, it is imperative to be flexible when designing personalized nutrition education so that the participant's nutrition education goals are achieved and the benefit to the participant is maximized.

The nutrition education guidance mentions some examples of counseling methods/teaching strategies and shows the relationship of each nutrition education element to the other elements. For more detailed information about the different counseling methods, please review resources available such as those found in libraries and through the Internet, including the WIC Works Resource Center (<http://www.nal.usda.gov/wicworks/>).

E. Element 4: Select Delivery Medium

1. Can the telephone or any electronic delivery media be used to provide all participant nutrition education so that no participant has to come into the clinic for their nutrition education contacts?

No, using the same delivery medium for all participants is not recommended for effective nutrition education. No one delivery medium fits the needs and abilities of all WIC participants. Individual participants have different skills and abilities and interests regarding the use of different delivery media. For example, participants who have an aptitude for computers and those who may have scheduling difficulties may be ideal candidates for some electronic media if the State agency has the effective means and trained nutrition education staff to support the use of such delivery media.

For example, electronic methods may be suitable for those participants and State and local agencies that have access to and know how to use the equipment (e.g. computer, kiosks). WIC State agencies considering the use of electronic delivery media should refer to the criteria identified in Appendix A, *Criteria for the Development and Evaluation of Electronic-Based Nutrition Education for WIC Participants*, found in the WIC nutrition education guidance.

F. Element 5: Select Informational/Environmental Reinforcements

1. In the past, my agency or clinic has made available videos, brochures, and pamphlets and counted such items as a nutrition education contact. Why is this not appropriate now?

The guidance identifies the elements of nutrition education that have been determined by current research to contribute to positive changes in behavior. Informational/environmental reinforcements such as pamphlets, newsletters, bulletin boards, videotapes and take home activities by themselves are not effective according to research. Therefore, the use of reinforcements independent of other nutrition education elements is not considered to be effective and should not be counted as a nutrition education contact/intervention. They can be used to reinforce, enhance, and support nutrition education contacts as funds are available. In a time of tight budgets, it is important that funds are used effectively to maximize the benefit to the participant.

2. Sometimes we have lots of NSA money at the end of the fiscal year and in the past have used it to purchase extensive quantities of brochures. Should we continue doing this?

You may want to reassess your agency needs and expenditure plans for NSA funds. The State agency is encouraged to use funds in a manner that maximizes the State's ability to provide effective nutrition education. Some State agencies may consider funding additional staff training to strengthen the services provided instead of purchasing extensive quantities of brochures or other educational reinforcements. The agency should consider the following questions in order to better plan for NSA expenditures in coming years: What would improve or maximize the nutrition education benefit provided by your agency? Could your nutrition education staff benefit from additional training? What staff competencies need to be strengthened or refreshed? In the nutrition education design process, what nutrition education element needs strengthening?

G. Element 6: Follow-up

1. What does the term “follow-up” mean in the nutrition education guidance?

In the WIC setting, follow-up may occur during a subsequent individual or class counseling session, or by telephone or electronic means. Follow-up encourages ongoing support by reinforcing the message and the nutrition education goal(s) and it allows both the staff and the participant to examine where the participant was at the beginning of the process and where the participant is now.

Follow-up provides staff with the opportunity to provide positive support when the participant’s goals are achieved. It also helps to identify barriers that may be hindering the participant’s progress. Follow-up provides the opportunity to reassess and refine future nutrition education plans.

2. *WIC staff haven’t had to do follow-up before, why now?*

Follow-up is needed to assess for behavior change, identify barriers in order to find solutions that remove the barriers, reinforce desired outcomes, and determine intervention effectiveness. Follow-up should be interactive and strengthen nutrition education but does not replace a nutrition education contact/intervention. Follow-up provides ongoing support by reinforcing nutrition education messages and the participant’s nutrition education goals.

3. *Where can WIC staff find time to do follow-up?*

Follow-up may be incorporated during the second nutrition education contact/intervention, may occur at recertification, or be conducted during food instrument pick-up, by telephone or electronic means. Recertification is an appropriate time for WIC staff to reassess participant nutrition goals to better align the tailoring of subsequent nutrition services to current needs.

H. Summary

1. Why is it recommended to use the six nutrition education elements?

Participant nutrition education interventions/contacts that contain all six elements described in the guidance may be more effective in achieving the WIC nutrition education goals, meeting NSS criteria, and meeting participant needs while also supporting RQNS, a continuous program improvement process.

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