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United States
Department of
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Food and
Nutrition
Service

SUBJECT: WIC Nutrition Education Guidance

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TO: Regional Directors
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WIC State and local agencies are required by section 246.11 of WIC Program regulations to design nutrition education to achieve the broad regulatory nutrition education goals and to make available to participants at least a minimum number of nutrition education contacts during each certification period. However, studies have shown that WIC needs to: 1) strengthen its nutrition education component; 2) adopt a more behavioral approach in nutrition counseling; 3) be more client-oriented; and 4) focus on healthy behavior for life.

The attached 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. Appendix A, *Criteria for the Development and Evaluation of Electronic-Based Nutrition Education for WIC Participants*, is designed to provide specific technical assistance to State and local WIC agencies by providing standardized, science-based criteria to use when designing, developing and evaluating electronic-based nutrition education for WIC participants. Appendix A contains a checklist of site evaluation questions, the criterion rationale and references.

Nutrition education is the Program benefit that sets WIC apart from the other nutrition assistance programs as a premiere public health program. Applying the elements of effective nutrition education will enable WIC agencies to provide quality, effective and relevant nutrition education that helps participants achieve and maintain optimal nutrition status.

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Attachments

WIC Program

NUTRITION EDUCATION GUIDANCE

This guidance identifies the elements of nutrition education contacts/interventions that have been determined by research to be effective. The guidance is intended to assist State agencies in incorporating these elements into the design of nutrition education, thereby maximizing the nutrition education benefit provided to participants of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Appendix A, *Criteria for the Development and Evaluation of Electronic-Based Nutrition Education for WIC Participants*, is designed to provide specific guidance as an assessment tool regarding electronic-based WIC nutrition education.

Background and Purpose: WIC Nutrition Education

Nutrition education is the program benefit that sets WIC apart from the other Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) nutrition assistance programs. The WIC Program is the only FNS nutrition assistance program with legislative and regulatory requirements to provide nutrition education to participants, as specified in sections 17(b)(7), 17(f)(1)(C)(x), and 17(j) of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966, as amended, and the Federal WIC regulations in sections 246.2 and 246.11. Federal regulations require that WIC nutrition education be a benefit that is available at no cost to participants, be easily understood by participants, bear a practical relationship to the participant's nutritional needs, household situation and cultural preferences, and be designed to achieve the regulatory nutrition education goals.

The goals of WIC nutrition education, as explained in section 246.11(b) of the Federal WIC regulations, are to: 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. WIC nutrition education also raises the awareness about the dangers of using drugs and other harmful substances during pregnancy and while breastfeeding. WIC State agencies are responsible for developing nutrition education plans that support these nutrition education goals. Finding ways to deliver effective nutrition education and achieve the nutrition education goals are critical for the continued success of the Program and supports the ongoing process of Revitalizing Quality Nutrition Services (RQNS) in WIC.

RQNS is designed to enhance and strengthen the effectiveness of WIC nutrition services. Studies have shown that WIC needs to: 1) strengthen its nutrition education component; 2) adopt a more behavioral approach in nutrition counseling; 3) be more client-oriented; and 4) focus on healthy behavior for life.¹

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Providing Effective Nutrition Education

WIC nutrition education is effective when it results in a positive nutrition-related behavior change. Typically, the traditional WIC nutrition education contact/intervention has been a face-to-face meeting between the participant and the WIC staff. Interaction between WIC staff and participants is important because the interaction encourages participants to ask questions and to receive reliable nutrition advice that addresses their special nutrition needs. However, advances in technology coupled with limited clinic/staff resources and an increasingly diverse WIC population have resulted in Federal, State and local agencies exploring the use of emerging technology and multifaceted methods to support effective nutrition education. In the 2001 GAO report titled “Food Assistance: WIC Faces Challenges in Providing Nutrition Services”, GAO recognizes the challenges in WIC for improving the use of information technology to enhance service delivery and program management.²

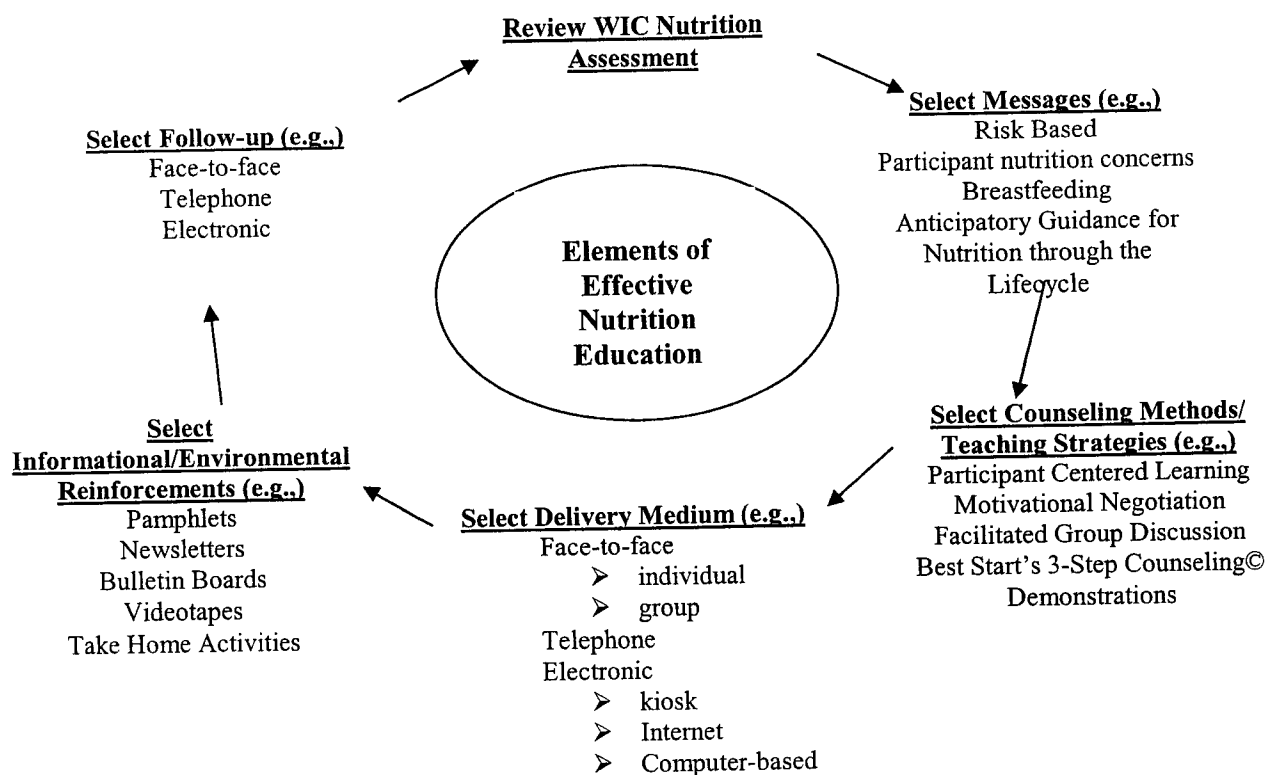
Research consistently shows that nutrition education interventions that use education methods directed at behavioral change are more likely to achieve positive results than interventions focused on dissemination of information only (i.e., lectures, handouts).³ Behavior change also serves as an outcome measure for evaluating the effectiveness of a nutrition education contact/intervention. Although behavior change is an end goal, it is important to not underestimate the value of affecting the precursors of behavioral changes and measuring those in evaluation of nutrition education in the WIC program. Follow-up is also necessary to determine whether a change has occurred and to further assist participants in achieving and maintaining nutrition-related behavior change.⁴ Current research suggests that the most effective nutrition education interventions contain components from several educational theories and/or models regardless of the delivery method or medium used.⁵ (see Figure 1 for examples)

WIC Nutrition Assessment

The WIC nutrition assessment is the first step in providing quality nutrition services. The WIC nutrition assessment is used for two purposes: (1) to determine eligibility of the applicant; and (2) to serve as the basis from which all subsequent WIC nutrition services are provided. More specifically, the information gathered during the assessment process is used to assess the applicant’s nutritional status and risk (associated with an increased likelihood of poor outcomes), tailor the food package, design appropriate nutrition education, and make referrals to health and social services.

FNS is developing the Value Enhanced Nutrition Assessment (VENA) initiative to assist State agencies in developing and implementing assessment policies and procedures that provide the foundation for targeted and relevant nutrition education and other WIC nutrition services that guide and support families in making healthier eating and lifestyle choices. This guidance supports the VENA philosophy.

Figure 1: Process of Delivering Effective Nutrition Education in WIC



Elements of an Effective Nutrition Education Contact/Intervention

Effective nutrition education should elicit a behavior change that will help the participant achieve and maintain a positive change in dietary and physical activity habits, resulting in improved nutritional status and in the prevention of nutrition-related problems regardless of the delivery medium. Effective nutrition education contacts/interventions should also be easily understood by participants taking into consideration participants personal and cultural preferences, educational and environmental limitations, and be consistent with the WIC Nutrition Services Standards⁶ (WIC NSS). The most effective WIC nutrition education contact/intervention should incorporate the following six elements:

- A review of the WIC nutrition assessment to identify the participant’s nutritional risk factors, needs and concerns;
- Messages that engage the participant in setting individual, simple and attainable goals and provide clear and relevant “how to” actions to accomplish those goals;
- Counseling methods/teaching strategies that are relevant to the participant’s nutritional risk and are easily understood by the participant;
- A delivery medium that creates opportunities for participant interaction and feedback;
- Continuous support through informational/environmental reinforcements; and
- Follow-up to assess for behavior change and determine intervention effectiveness.

Reviewing the WIC Nutrition Assessment for Nutrition Education Purposes

The WIC nutrition assessment directs nutrition education by answering the questions: “What topic(s) is most important to cover at this time?”, “What counseling method or teaching strategy will most effectively assist the participant to improve her health status and/or achieve a positive change in dietary habits?”, “What may be the most effective way(s) to deliver the message – in person, over the phone, and/or by participating via an electronic-based lesson?”, and “What reinforcements can support the nutrition education provided?” Based on the assessment, WIC staff should use critical thinking skills and professional judgment to establish the participant’s nutrition education goal and determine how to best meet the participant’s needs and maximize the nutrition services offered to the participant.

Nutrition Education Messages

Nutrition messages should be tailored to maximize the impact and benefit for the participant and focused towards attaining WIC’s regulatory goals for nutrition education. The nutrition education offered may include a wide array of messages that are relevant to participant’s nutritional risk factors and individual nutrition needs/concerns as well as emerging health issues. WIC staff use the assessment information, critical thinking skills, and professional judgment to select the most relevant and effective tailored nutrition education message(s) for the participant.

Counseling Methods/Teaching Strategies

There is no one counseling method or teaching strategy that fits the needs of all participants. Individuals vary greatly in how they learn, process, and use information and in their readiness to change. Effective nutrition education consists of counseling methods that consider multiple learning aptitudes identified during the WIC nutrition assessment process and subsequent follow-up.

Regardless of the counseling method/teaching strategy used, a characteristic that has been shown to be effective in changing behavior is interaction that engages the participant. Interaction means a two-way exchange of information. Interactive approaches to nutrition education have been shown to be effective in changing behavior and provide participants the opportunity for questions and feedback.

Interactive nutrition education can be achieved in an individual or group session. Using strategies that engage the participants in identifying individual goals or important issues as well as creating solutions that work for them will enhance the effectiveness of nutrition education.

Delivery Medium

The WIC nutrition educator may use multiple delivery media during nutrition education contacts/intervention. Although face-to-face personalized contact is considered the optimal medium for providing nutrition education, new technology such as computer-based, may allow WIC nutrition education to meet the needs of participants through a variety of delivery media while still providing an effective nutrition education contact/intervention. Any medium that incorporates the elements of an effective nutrition education and engages the participant may be appropriate in WIC.

Reinforcements of nutrition education

Informational materials and teaching aids provide the opportunity for selected nutrition messages to be repeated. Repeated exposure to a nutrition message has been shown to facilitate adoption of the message by the client. However, the use of the following reinforcements independent of other nutrition education elements is **not considered to be effective** and should not be counted as a nutrition education contact/intervention: publications/pamphlets, take-home activities/newsletters, videotapes, posters/bulletin boards/displays/health fairs and public service announcements/radio/TV advertisements.

Follow-up and Support

Follow-up should be interactive and strengthens nutrition education but does not replace a nutrition education contact/intervention. Follow-up provides an opportunity for both the nutrition educator and the participant to examine progress toward goals, to provide positive support, to identify barriers that may be hindering the participant's progress and to reassess and refine future nutrition education plans. Follow-up provides ongoing support by reinforcing nutrition education message(s) and the participants' nutrition education goal(s).

Follow-up may be incorporated during the second nutrition education contact/intervention, may occur at recertification, or be a separate activity such as during voucher 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.

Applying the Process of Effective Nutrition Education

Example 1:

The elements of effective nutrition education can be incorporated into WIC nutrition education through a variety of electronic delivery mediums, such as the Internet, computer software, kiosk and modules by including components that: direct the participant to appropriate topics based on the nutrition risk assessment; provide interaction, such as use of scenarios or quizzes; allow the participant to set goals, as well as provide specific examples on how to attain the goals; provide "take-home" tips and printable reinforcements; and, finally provide a method for follow-up via a

face-to-face meeting, or through email or by telephone, to provide support and allow for questions.

Appendix A provides a tool for use by WIC State and local agencies to assist with the design, development and evaluation of electronic-based nutrition education through the application of standardized science-based criteria.

Example 2:

The elements of effective nutrition education can also be applied via telephone. For example, the WIC nutrition educator can assess the participant's readiness to change and determine relevant nutrition messages during a telephone conference that use participant centered learning as the counseling method/teaching strategy. This combination of delivery medium and counseling method/teaching strategy allows for participant interaction, goal setting and immediate feedback. Information that reinforces the messages can be provided via mail, electronically or at the next clinic visit. An additional phone call or an in-person consultation during the next clinic visit provide opportunities for follow-up and can be used to determine the effectiveness of the initial telephone contact.

Summary

Nutrition education is the Program benefit that makes WIC a premiere public health program, setting it apart from other nutrition assistance programs. As an integral part of the WIC Program and reinforced through the process of RQNS, effective nutrition education should be designed to elicit a positive behavior change regardless of delivery method. Participant nutrition education contacts / interventions should contain all six elements described in this memorandum in order to be effective in meeting participant needs, the goals of WIC nutrition education and to be counted as a nutrition education contact.

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