

## **Backgrounder on the WIC Food Packages**

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) was created by Congress in 1972. WIC is designed to address the needs of low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, infants, and children up to five years of age who are at nutritional risk. The WIC Program is designed to serve as an adjunct to good health care during critical times of growth and development to prevent the occurrence of health problems and to improve the health status of Program participants. WIC affects the nutritional status of participants through the provision of healthy supplemental foods, nutrition education, and referrals to health and other social services.

The foods provided in the WIC food packages have largely remained unchanged in almost 30 years. Historically, the supplemental foods authorized for the WIC food packages are good sources of five target nutrients; vitamins A and C, iron, calcium, and protein. WIC's success in improving birth outcomes, improved health/nutritional status, and saving healthcare costs led to WIC's reputation as the premier health and nutrition program in the nation.

In recent years, the ability of the WIC Program to address the supplemental nutritional needs of WIC participants through its food packages has received growing attention. Significant interest in updating the food packages based on the most current scientific information about the nutritional needs of low-income, culturally diverse women, infants and children has been voiced by WIC Program administrators, the medical and scientific

communities, advocacy groups, and Congress. In 2003, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academies was asked by the Department of Agriculture to conduct a careful scientific review of the nutritional needs of the WIC population and to make recommendations for changes to the current food packages. IOM's final report, *WIC Food Packages: Time for a Change*, contained IOM's recommendations for revisions to the WIC food packages.

In 2007, based largely on the recommendations of the IOM, comprehensive revisions to the WIC food packages were made. The new food packages align with the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and infant feeding practice guidelines of the American Academy of Pediatrics. The food packages better promote and support the establishment of successful, long-term breastfeeding, provide WIC participants with a wider variety of foods including fruits and vegetables and whole grains, and provide WIC State agencies greater flexibility in prescribing food packages to accommodate the cultural food preferences of WIC participants.