

More choices now available under Minnesota WIC Nutrition Program

Written by Jim Wishner
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Foods provided under the federal Women, Infants and Children Nutrition program (WIC) now include fruits and vegetables. The changes are the first major overhaul of the foods available through WIC. The 35-year-old federally-funded nutrition program serves lower-income and nutritionally-at-risk pregnant and breast-feeding women, their infants and young children.

JoAnne Berkenkamp is program director of local foods with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. Her Minnesota-based organization has long been recommending the upgraded food selections.

"In the United States, relatively few of us actually get the recommended number of servings of fresh fruits and vegetables per day. That's typically the case for the types of women who are part of WIC - which is to say, pregnant and lactating women - and for young children."

She says 141,000 women, infants and children in Minnesota participate in WIC. All retail food vendors - no matter their size - that are authorized to accept WIC vouchers will be required to make several varieties of fresh fruits and vegetables available at all times now, Berkenkamp notes. Many low-income communities do not have easy access to supermarkets, she explains, and their residents often rely on smaller stores for groceries, where fresh produce can be scarce.

Berkenkamp says other beneficial foods are on the expanded WIC menu, too.

"It may include the expansion of whole-grain products, corn tortillas, brown rice, oatmeal and items like soy beverages and tofu. I give them credit for trying to incorporate a number of items that respond to the cultural preferences of different parts of our community."

The old food requirements were set decades ago, she says. Supporters of the new standards include the Minnesota Children's Defense Fund.

Details of the new federal nutritional guidelines are available at <http://health.state.mn.us/divs/fh/wic/vendor/fpchng/shopguide.pdf>.