

Introduction

The WIC Program is about food. It is about the foods people eat and the nutrients that food contains. Food is necessary for life and certain combinations of food are needed to maintain health. No one food contains all the nutrients needed by the human body. Different groups of food contain specific nutrients and it takes a diet composed of different foods to get all the nutrients that are needed by the body. One of the primary functions of WIC is to help participants eat the right combinations of foods so that pregnant women give birth to healthy infants and that infants and children grow to be healthy adults.

Food is a complex, varied and wonderful substance. Besides nourishment, food gives us pleasure, comfort, and satiety. It helps us to socialize with our friends and family. It is part of our celebrations, religion, and plays a significant role in defining our culture. Food can be art. Food comes in many shapes, sizes, colors, and with a wide variety of aromas. People create gourmet foods with smells and flavors that make us salivate and fanciful foods that are tantalizing and novel in appearance.

While most people are aware that without food they will die and that without the right types of foods they will eventually become sick, few people actually choose the foods they eat because of nutrients. In our society food is generally plentiful and the effects of not eating the right types of foods may not show for weeks, months or years. As a result, people choose the foods they eat for a variety of reasons other than nutrition.

Instead of eating for nourishment most people eat because it is simply time to eat, because something smells good or looks appetizing, because they are bored, happy, sad or stressed, because of friends or events in their lives. When people are asked why they eat certain foods rarely do they say for nutritional value. They eat foods because of taste, cost, convenience, and a whole host of other reasons. Nutrition is usually near the bottom of the list as a reason to choose one food over another.

Look at the list of events to the left and think of foods that are associated with each event (see the list of possible associated foods at the end of this section). There are very few events in life that are not in some way associated with food. It is important to remember these associations when working with WIC participants. Even though the goal of WIC may be to increase nutrient intake, these associations and other reasons for eating may have far greater influence on a person's choice of foods.



Birthday
Thanksgiving
Halloween
Baseball Game
Circus
Movie
Wedding
New Years Eve
Christmas
Passover
Valentine's Day
Easter
Picnic

It is sometimes difficult to get accurate food intake information to understand how a person eats. As an example, if a person eats because of stress, they may be unwilling to acknowledge what they eat. They may be embarrassed by their stress and its effects on eating. Sometimes when people are stressed, they may not even remember what they eat. Stress may prevent them from thinking about food as they are eating.

It can also be difficult to convince people to change their diets especially if we only use nutrition as a reason to change. While the most important reason to drink milk may be for its calcium, riboflavin, and protein content few people think of nutrition when choosing what to drink. They choose diet soda because it is lower in calories or because it is refreshing. They choose coffee for the caffeine. They choose bottled water because it won't spoil without refrigeration. They drink a citrus flavored beverage because it is sweet, has a great advertising campaign, and it is what their friends drink. When a person does not get enough calcium in their diet it isn't always effective to tell them to drink milk for calcium. It is important to also think of the other reasons a person eats and then look for ways to change their behavior.

While WIC participants eat for many reasons the Diet Screening Module is mostly about assessing people's diets for nutritional adequacy. People who eat nutritionally adequate diets are healthier and enjoy a better quality of life. Infants and children are more likely to reach their physical and mental potential when eating an adequate diet. Women are likely to have a healthier pregnancy and better health afterwards when they eat an adequate diet. People, in general, are less likely to get sick when they eat a healthy diet.

WIC participants are especially vulnerable to the effects of an inadequate diet. WIC participants are at a stage in their lives when nutritional needs are high and as a group, WIC participants are more likely to have diets low in nutrients. The effects of an inadequate diet can cause serious health problems including some that will last a lifetime.

A pregnant woman with low iron is more likely to have complications during delivery including some that can be very serious, even life threatening. They are also more likely to give birth to low-birth-weight babies. It is well known that low-birth-weight babies have many serious health challenges after birth. Some of these challenges can have lasting effects throughout life, for example on mental development. A pregnant woman with a diet low in folate (one of the B vitamins) is more likely to give birth to a child with serious birth defects. An infant with low iron

status can have stunted mental development. These are only a few examples of the effects poor nutrition can have on women, infants, and children, but they give some idea of the importance of an adequate diet for WIC participants.

The challenge for WIC staff is to identify the participants who have inadequate diets and to find ways to help the participants to improve their diets. We must first collect accurate food intake information, evaluate the diet for adequacy, and then help the participant to make changes to their food intake. While doing all of this we need to consider the nutrients the person needs and all of the other reasons that motivate a person to eat.

In the first section of this module you will learn how to obtain food intake information. Then you will learn how to evaluate diets and compare them against a standard to determine nutritional adequacy. You will learn how to enter the information you obtain into ASPENS so that a participant may be risked for “Inadequate Diet.” Along the way the module will give you some general information about nutrients and foods. Finally, the module will give some tips on educating participants and helping to set goals related to diet.

Possible Food Associations with Events

- Birthday (Birthday cake and ice cream)
- Thanksgiving (Turkey, stuffing, cranberries, and pumpkin pie)
- Halloween (Candy including specific kinds like candy corn)
- Baseball Game (Hotdogs, bratwurst with sauerkraut, and beer)
- Circus (Cotton candy)
- Movie (Popcorn and soda pop)
- Wedding (Wedding cake and champagne)
- New Years Eve (Champagne, blackeyed peas, mustard greens, and hog jowls - depending on where you live!)
- Christmas (Fruit cake, candy canes, roasted chestnuts, and many more)
- Passover (Lamb, matzo, bitter greens)
- Valentine’s Day (Chocolates in a heart-shaped box)
- Easter (Colored eggs, jelly beans, chocolate bunnies)
- Picnic (Potato salad, coleslaw, sand, and ants)