



# OPTIMIZING NUTRITION SECURITY IN THE WIC CEREAL CATEGORY

## ISSUE OVERVIEW

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) has, among other recommendations, proposed revisions to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) cereal category to require that all authorized cereals be whole grain vs. the current requirement that at least half of cereals be whole grain. ***This policy would effectively eliminate approximately half of the cereals offered through WIC.***

Cereals at risk for elimination are made with fortified staple grains (corn and rice based), meet WIC's iron and strict sugar requirements (<6 grams of sugar per ounce), and are:

- Highly redeemed cereals that efficiently deliver the critical nutrients, iron and folate
- Culturally preferred by Hispanic consumers
- Accessible solutions for families with food allergies
- More available in the marketplace than some remaining cereals
- Enjoyed for breakfast, snacks, and in recipes

In 2022, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is expected to update the WIC food package with this NASEM recommendation in mind. It is crucial that policy makers and the USDA consider the unintended consequences of allowing only whole grain cereals in the WIC program.

**Policymakers must recognize that strictly implementing NASEM's cereal recommendations could negatively affect the health of women and children by reducing WIC cereal redemption rates and affect program participation.**

**USDA should reassess the impact of changes on cereal redemption and should work to increase whole grains within the WIC food package while maintaining fortified non-whole-grain cereals to meet the needs of those with food allergies and cultural preferences.**

## UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES IMPACT WIC PARTICIPANTS

- **REDEMPTION RATES:** EBT data shows that implementing a whole-grain-rich only policy can lower cereal redemption, which is contrary to public health goals. In 2017, NASEM estimated a whole-grain-only cereal policy would result in a 10% decline in the redemption of cereal benefits. In 2021, cereal redemption in Oklahoma (where this policy has been in place for over 10 years) is 36%.<sup>7</sup> **Oklahoma's 2021 redemption is 4 times more than what NASEM predicted in its 2017 report.** Lower cereal redemption is a particular concern as cereal is critical to iron and folate intake and is commonly consumed with milk and fruit.
- **CULTURAL PREFERENCES:** About 40% of WIC participants identify as Hispanic/Latino<sup>8</sup>, and cereals that would be eliminated with a whole grain-only cereal policy are most popular with this population<sup>9</sup>. Eliminating these options could cause cereal redemption to decline with this group. Policymakers are required to consider cultural preference and cultural eating patterns when making changes to the program.
- **ALLERGY SOLUTIONS:** Cereals that would be eliminated serve as critical solutions for families with food allergies and sensitivities. USDA recognized this concern in its Final Rule in 2014 when they explicitly stated that the regulation "allows certain corn and rice-based cereals to be offered to participants who may have allergies to whole grain cereals."
- **ACCESS:** Some of the cereals that would be eliminated are 3x more available in large retailers<sup>10</sup> than some whole-grain cereals. Decreased accessibility means less options are available to consumers and can discourage redemption, leading to redemption declines. Inequitable access to WIC authorized foods is especially a concern to those with food allergies and cultural preferences who rely on these food items when making WIC purchases. The cereals that would be eliminated are also popular and commonly accessible in WIC-only stores.

## ROLE OF CEREAL IN WIC

Fortified non-whole-grain cereals provide crucial nutrients to WIC participants and contribute to the establishment of healthful meal patterns.<sup>1,2</sup>

- Cereal was originally included in the WIC food package to provide iron to prevent and treat iron deficiency anemia, which is critical to child and maternal health and is still a concern today. In the U.S., 77% of breastfed infants have inadequate iron intake during the second half of infancy.<sup>1</sup> To address this gap, WIC requires cereal to contain a minimum of 28 milligrams iron per 100 grams.
- Adequate intake of folate-rich foods is also important prior to and during pregnancy. Folate intake enables healthy pregnancy outcomes by reducing a woman's risk of having a child with neural tube defects<sup>3</sup>.

***Ounce for ounce, cereal is the largest contributor of iron and folate within the WIC food package.***

Cereal also is a contributor of healthy meal patterns. WIC cereals drive consumption of other essential WIC food package foods, fruit and milk.

### Cereal is:

- The #1 source of folate and iron in kids and adults' diets<sup>4</sup>
- The #2 source vitamin D and magnesium to kids' diets<sup>4</sup>
- Most often eaten with milk<sup>5</sup>
- The food item that fruit is most added to<sup>6</sup>



## Optimizing Nutrition Security in the WIC Cereal Category

**"For many participants, however, some foods may not align with personal or cultural preferences, leading to reduced redemption and consumption."**

***NASEM, 2017 Review of WIC Food Packages: Improving Balance and Choice: Final Report***

*USDA should consider the following solutions to ensure adequate cereal choice and access for WIC participants*

Reassess the impact of NASEM cereal recommendation on redemption

Include key fortified non-whole grain cereals

Authorize all eligible whole grain cereals in each state

Modernize WIC's whole grain definition

Consider whole-grain incentive programs

### REFERENCES

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