

Panel reverses, says white potatoes ok for WIC recipients

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Ostracized by health officials for several years, the white potato is back in favor.

The prestigious Institute of Medicine said Tuesday that pregnant women and moms should be allowed to buy white potatoes with subsidies from the government's Women, Infants and Children program. An IOM panel said people aren't getting enough starchy vegetables or potassium and fiber, nutrients that are plentiful in potatoes.

That's a reversal of a 2006 IOM report that recommended against including white potatoes in the WIC program, saying people were eating too many of them. WIC gives needy pregnant women and mothers government-subsidized food vouchers to ensure good nutrition for their families.

What's changed since 2006? The government's dietary guidelines increased the recommendation for starchy vegetables to 3.5 cups per week for children and 5 cups per week for women. Under the newer recommendations, the panel estimates that children are consuming about 64 percent of what is recommended and women are consuming about 56 percent.

"Intakes of all vegetable subgroups should be improved, including those of starchy vegetables," the report says. White potatoes include russet, red, yellow, fingerling, blue, and purple potatoes.

Allowing white potatoes into WIC doesn't mean recipients will be buying potatoes and french fries. The WIC program only allows the purchase of vegetables without added sugars, fats or oils. The exact requirements vary state to state, but they can be fresh, frozen or canned, as long as they don't have the added ingredients.

The USDA uses the IOM recommendations to decide what exactly will be allowed in the WIC program.

But they also have taken on political overtones. The new recommendations are a major victory for the potato industry and lawmakers from potato-growing states, who have lobbied for several years to include potatoes in WIC. Those lawmakers successfully added language to a massive year-end spending bill that allowed potatoes in the program for the first time.

The spending bill expires later this year, and Tuesday's IOM recommendation likely means Congress won't have to intervene on the issue going forward.

Officials who fought congressional efforts to intervene appeared to welcome IOM's new advice. When the spending bill adding potatoes to WIC passed in December, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said lawmakers shouldn't be meddling in science. USDA spokesman Cullen Schwarz said Tuesday that the department thanks the IOM for their analysis and will "continue to ensure that WIC reflects the panel's recommendations."

Douglas Greenaway, president of the National WIC Association, said the report proves that "science should be at the center" of decisions about foods in WIC. He said Congress making decisions on WIC "opens the doors to special interest groups to press for their particular foods to be in the food package."

The potato industry had another major legislative victory in 2011, when Congress voted to thwart the Agriculture Department's recommendation that only two servings a week of potatoes and other starchy vegetables be served in federally subsidized school lunches. The USDA effort was an attempt to limit the proliferation of french fries on school lunch lines.

The panel didn't review how potatoes purchased on WIC were prepared at home, but doctors on the committee pointed out that people often add oils and cheese to other vegetables, besides potatoes.

"We're not sure that potatoes are prepared in the home a whole lot differently from other vegetables," said Dr. Susan Baker of the Women and Children's Hospital of Buffalo.

A new version of the dietary guidelines is due later this year. The IOM said its recommendation should be re-evaluated if the current guidelines for starchy vegetables change.

WIC provides grants to states to provide food vouchers to low-income pregnant women, women who have recently given birth and infants and children up to age 5 who are found to be at nutritional risk. Only a handful of foods meant to boost nutrition are allowed, such as whole grains, low-fat dairy and fruits and vegetables.

Kathleen Rasmussen, a professor of nutrition at Cornell University, chaired the IOM committee. She says they don't know exactly how the recommendation will affect WIC recipients' buying patterns, but there is some evidence that those consumers like other vegetables just as much as they like potatoes.

"People like potatoes and they buy a lot of potatoes, but when you give them a voucher they don't necessarily buy potatoes with it," she said.

More information: www.nap.edu/catalog/20221/revi...on-of-white-potatoes

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