

Researchers look to improve the WIC shopping experience

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For many people, the need to go grocery shopping is met with a sigh, or an "ugh." It's generally not considered to be an enjoyable experience.

For moms who shop using WIC benefits, it can be a downright awful experience, one that's often made worse by difficulty finding eligible

products and dealing with a lengthy checkout process. Add kids in tow and it's enough for many moms to forego re-enrolling in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, commonly known as WIC.

But researchers at the University at Buffalo are working on ways to improve the WIC shopping experience so that customers stay in the program. Moreover, they're working with a Western New York-based supermarket chain on a pilot project aimed at making it easier for WIC customers to find and use eligible products.

The team, which includes a researcher from North Carolina State University, recently published a study in the *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* that is among the first to examine both barriers to and possible strategies for WIC shopping.

WIC provides supplemental foods and [nutrition](#) education to low-income pregnant and postpartum women with infants and children up to age 5 whose household incomes are below state-defined thresholds.

While WIC has been proven to improve children's health, participation in the program isn't great, with some reports indicating that as few as 73% of infants, 38% of children and 67% of pregnant and postpartum women eligible for WIC actually participate.

"The restrictions on the foods that families can buy with WIC make the shopping experience difficult, but there are some things that stores can do to make it easier, such as using product placement and signage. Better staff training helps a lot, too," says Lucia Leone, Ph.D., the study's lead author.

"Poor shopping experiences can lead people to drop off WIC or not re-enroll because they feel like the time and frustration isn't worth it. This

leaves them without a benefit that we know improves children's health," adds Leone, an assistant professor of community health and health behavior in UB's School of Public Health and Health Professions.

WIC barriers

Researchers identified several key barriers to shopping with WIC. In addition to restrictions on eligible foods, another common challenge is identifying the correct product size (11 oz. vs. 14 oz., for example) and type (low sodium vs. regular). New York State now has an app to help identify which items are eligible, but it doesn't let you know where to find them in a specific [store](#).

Until recently, further confusion often ensued during checkout, which was challenging when the cashier wasn't well trained, a common occurrence given the frequent turnover among grocery store staff. The checkout experience has improved, Leone notes, with the implementation of electronic benefits transfer (EBT) for WIC, which occurred after this study took place. The WIC EBT system replaced the paper vouchers shoppers used previously.

Then there's the obstacle of product availability, an issue that was exacerbated over the past year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which retailers struggled to keep certain products in stock due to high demand.

WIC doesn't allow replacement products, so if a shopper can't find a 12 oz. box or larger of a plain cereal during her first shopping trip, she will then have to make a special trip, possibly visiting multiple stores.

In addition, WIC benefits can't be redeemed online. "This meant that parents had to choose between bringing small children to the store during a pandemic or not fulfilling their benefits," Leone says.

"Aside from the shopping issues, some families struggle to use all of the products if they are not items their family eats regularly," she adds.

There's also the issue of stigma, as many WIC shoppers express worry about how other customers perceive them.

Strategies for an improved experience

For this study, researchers in 2015 conducted eight focus groups involving 63 women in Erie and Niagara counties in Western New York. Participants described some of the challenges associated with WIC, and also talked about what worked well.

One such strategy is "shelf-talkers," or special signs that denote WIC eligible products, making them easier to find. The signs help reduce search time and alleviate confusion at checkout. New York State regulations, however, don't allow most stores to use shelf-talkers. Nor can retailers offer WIC-only sections.

Of course, well-trained grocery store staff, especially cashiers and store managers, also improve a shopping trip by cutting down on the amount of time spent cashing out.

Additional strategies mentioned included having a WIC product guide available in store and allowing WIC shoppers to use self-checkout.

Partnering with Tops Markets to improve WIC shopping experience

There is currently no research available on the role of retailer interventions to improve WIC redemption and/or retention rates.

That's why Leone and her team are piloting a project with Tops Markets on Niagara Street in Buffalo.

"The goal of this project is to make it easier to use WIC products by sharing recipes made with mostly WIC products," Leone says. "More importantly, all those items will be 'bundled' together in the store so that families can quickly go in and find all of the WIC items they need for the recipe in one place rather than searching around the store."

Customers won't have to purchase all the products, but, Leone notes, they tend to purchase bundled items because of perceived convenience. Non-WIC families can take advantage of these kid-friendly meal deals, too. Some items in the recipe bundle will also be on sale.

The bundled items are not sold in a package together, but are instead tied together by a recipe and located together in the store to make [shopping](#) for WIC products more convenient.

More information: Lucia Leone et al, The WIC Shopping Experience: A Qualitative Study Examining Retail-based Strategies to Increase WIC Retention and Redemption Rates, *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/19320248.2021.1915906](https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2021.1915906)

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