

WIC participation helped families better cope with 2022 infant formula shortage

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Families that participated in the WIC program—also known as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children—were much less likely to use potentially unsafe infant feeding

practices during the 2022 U.S. infant formula shortage than income-eligible families that did not participate.

Both WIC participants and non-participants reported being affected by the shortage at similar rates, according to a Washington State University study published in the [*Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*](#).

However, the researchers found that WIC participants were significantly more likely to cope with the shortage by changing the brand or type of [formula](#) or by getting it from a different source. They were also less likely to use less healthy feeding practices, such as using dairy milk or milk alternatives, watering down formula, or using homemade formula.

"WIC provides a safety net for infants and children, and early childhood WIC participation has long-lasting benefits for health, well-being and [academic achievement](#)," said Namrata Sanjeevi, the study's first author and a research associate in WSU's Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine. "By examining how WIC participation could be related to infant feeding practices during the formula shortage, our study adds important findings on how WIC can support families during times of crisis."

The study evaluated how participation in WIC impacted families' experiences and coping strategies during the monthslong shortage, which started in February 2022 when a manufacturer recall added to existing pandemic-related supply chain issues.

A federal nutrition assistance [program](#) that provides free formula and essential nutritious foods to [low-income families](#), the WIC program serves more than 1.4 million babies, about half of whom were receiving formula produced by the affected manufacturer.

Although [data](#) on why respondents selected specific coping strategies were not available, Sanjeevi said these findings provide some evidence

that more flexible WIC policies may have eased the burden on participating families during the shortage. Following the manufacturer recall, the [federal government](#) temporarily waived restrictions on WIC benefits that limited participants as to the type, size, and brand of formula they could obtain.

Sanjeevi believes the improved access provided by these waivers—most of which were in place through at least the end of 2022—may have kept WIC participants from using undesirable feeding practices. In addition, she said the program could have protected participants from the budget impact of surging formula prices, since formula is provided to them free of cost.

Data for the study came from the Household Pulse Survey, an [online survey](#) designed to measure U.S. household experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, and were collected between December 2022 and February 2023.

The researchers' analysis is based on data provided by 1,542 respondents whose [household income](#) was at or below 185% of the [federal poverty level](#)—the threshold for WIC participation—and who had children younger than 18 months. Out of those respondents, 881, or just under 60%, reported participating in WIC.

Senior study author Pablo Monsivais, an associate professor at the WSU College of Medicine, said this is consistent with federal statistics that suggest that only about half of the women who are eligible for WIC are enrolled in the program.

"We need to do more to understand and eliminate barriers that keep families from participating in this proven, cost-effective program," said Monsivais, adding that research has shown that every dollar invested in the program saves almost \$2.50 in medical, educational, and productivity

costs.

"WIC has been put under the microscope repeatedly," he said. "Our study adds to the growing body of evidence that the program protects the health and well-being of low-income families and makes good economic sense."

More information: Namrata Sanjeevi et al, WIC Participation and Coping Strategies Adopted by Families During the Infant Formula Shortage Crisis, *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jand.2023.09.019](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2023.09.019)

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