

The NY Quick WIC Study: Designing a Retail Intervention to Improve the WIC Shopping Experience

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The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is designed to improve the health and nutrition of pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children up to the age of 5 in households that are considered lower-income and face nutritional risk. WIC food packages have been found to improve diet quality in these populations, but WIC shoppers often face store-level barriers in applying their benefits. Related, WIC State Agencies must balance participation and effectiveness with cost containment in the design and implementation of the WIC program. In order to better understand how we can improve the WIC shopping experience, we conducted focus groups with WIC shoppers (n=63). Common WIC shopping barriers included cashier negative attitudes, lengthy check-out time, and poor staff training on the WIC program and redemption of WIC benefits. Retail-level strategies to improve the WIC shopping experience identified in this research included: manager assistance, signage identifying WIC-approved items on the shelf, and WIC-only product sections. Additionally, the majority of focus group participants indicated they would be interested in a WIC bundling program; this program would co-locate WIC ingredients in the retail setting to be used in a provided healthy, quick recipe.

Using the focus groups, we developed an in-store shopping intervention known as bundling to increase participant WIC benefit usage in 2 sites in Western New York and North Carolina. We created a local community advisory group of WIC participants to inform the design of the intervention, including bundle recipes, location in the store, and design of data collection. The NY Quick WIC Study is partnering with a local grocery store to feature a WIC bundling program promoted as “Kid-Friendly Meal Deals.” The goals of this research are to estimate the effect of bundling conditions on purchasing promoted WIC items, determine how the intervention affects shopping satisfaction and benefit redemption, and determine the most feasible and acceptable intervention condition for both WIC participants and retail staff. The current study is ongoing, and results will provide us with a better understanding of how to design and implement a WIC bundling program in partnership with food retailers, and if such a program improves the WIC shopping experience for participants and benefits usage overall. This research can contribute to novel strategies that benefit WIC shoppers, food retailers, and the WIC program overall.