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WIC Nutrition Benefits Go Electronic: Faster, Easier to Use

Helena is one of the first communities in Montana to offer an electronic benefit system for participants in its WIC supplemental nutrition program, public health officials said Monday.

The new system, called eWIC, replaces paper benefits with a charge card similar to a credit or debit card. Helena and four other communities began testing the program in June. It’s expected to go statewide later this month.

“For 40 years, WIC has been such an important program because it helps pregnant women and young kiddos get the good nutrition they need at a crucial time in their lives and development,” said Drenda Niemann, who oversees the program for Lewis and Clark Public Health. “Now WIC is even better. Folks can spend their benefits at the grocery store with the simple swipe of a card.

“Not only will this make it more convenient to do the grocery shopping,” she added. “It’s also more discreet. Our WIC clients can shop just like everyone else in the grocery line.”

Niemann said one goal of eWIC is to help reduce any stigma associated with the benefits and, in turn, encourage more people to use the nutrition program. WIC is open to pregnant or breastfeeding women, mothers of infants, and children up to age 5 who meet income guidelines.

In addition to financial help to buy healthy foods at supermarkets and farmers markets, benefits of WIC include:

- Nutrition screening, education, and counseling to improve eating behaviors and address nutrition problems;
- Access to preventive health programs and referrals to private and public health providers;
- Breastfeeding support and counseling;
- Free breast pumps;
- Referrals for dental screening; and
- Referrals to other local health and social services.

Nationwide, WIC serves more than 7 million people. Extensive research has found that it’s a cost-effective investment that improves the nutrition and health of low-income families.
A study this year by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a nonpartisan research and policy institute, found that:

- Women who participate in WIC give birth to healthier babies who are more likely to survive infancy.
- WIC supports more nutritious diets and better infant feeding practices.
- Low-income children participating in WIC more likely to receive preventive medical care than other low-income children.
- Children whose mothers participated in WIC while pregnant scored higher on assessments of mental development at age 2 than similar children whose mothers did not participate. The kids later performed better on reading assessments while in school.

“This program truly can make a lifelong difference for people,” Niemann said. “We’d sure like to see everyone who’s eligible take advantage of it, to give their little ones a healthy start on life.”

More information about WIC, including income guidelines, is available online at [www.lccountymt.gov/health/wic-nutrition-program.html](http://www.lccountymt.gov/health/wic-nutrition-program.html) or by calling 457-8912.