

Improving the California WIC Experience

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Leveraging behavioral design to improve the shopping experience

Shopping for WIC-approved foods can be intimidating and confusing, particularly for WIC participants new to the program or those shopping at a new grocery store. Moreover, shopping difficulties can negatively influence perceptions of the program and program participation. In June 2019, California rolled out a new WIC mobile app to improve the experience of shopping with WIC. We partnered with the California Department of Public Health, WIC Division (California WIC) to design recommendations for enhancements to the app to make the WIC shopping experience easier and more pleasant for participants.

Summary

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) helps about 8 million people each month purchase healthy food for their families.¹ While WIC is a helpful and effective program, barriers that arise while shopping with WIC food benefits can prevent people from participating in the program.

Previous research, both from ideas42 and other organizations, has found several common barriers during the shopping experience:

1. WIC sets strict constraints on what brands and quantities of food items are “eligible” to purchase (e.g., a participant can purchase “8 oz of cheese” from certain WIC-approved brands). Participants must navigate these constraints while shopping.
2. Inconsistent labeling of WIC-approved items in stores makes it hard for participants to find what they need.
3. Participants sometimes inadvertently pick up an ineligible food item. When they reach the checkout counter, they either have to pay out of pocket or put these items back. This can be embarrassing for participants and exacerbate the stigma participants feel.
4. Participants sometimes forget to redeem their benefits, often because they are unaware of when their benefits will expire.^{2,3,4}

Highlights

- ▶ Barriers in the WIC shopping experience lead to confusion and limited or lack of participation.
- ▶ Behaviorally informed tools, such as mobile apps, can help WIC participants navigate their benefits more easily.
- ▶ A behavioral lens can enhance existing mobile apps, like the one at CA WIC, to make them more actionable for participants

¹ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/frequently-asked-questions>

² <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Making-WIC-Work-Better-Full-Report.pdf>

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2212267218318914>

⁴ http://www.ideas42.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/I42_WIC-Paper-Final.pdf

Together, these barriers can make the WIC shopping experience one filled with intimidation and confusion. The repercussions of a challenging shopping experience are not trivial; these barriers can cause participants, particularly those new to the program,⁵ to not fully redeem their benefits, or worse, to drop out of the program. While increasing the flexibility of the program’s food benefits would go far to address some of these barriers, it requires legislative and administrative changes to the program. In the meantime, behaviorally informed shopping tools—like mobile applications (apps)—can help WIC participants navigate their benefits more easily.

In recent years, a majority of state WIC programs have made apps available to participants to help them do just that—and many are popular with WIC families, surpassing the 10,000 download mark. With the launch of EBT in 2019, California WIC developed their own mobile app to enhance the participant experience of shopping and navigating WIC benefits. In California WIC’s app, some features include: showcasing the remaining WIC benefits for a given month (the “food balance”); helping participants locate WIC-approved vendors near them; and allowing participants to scan the UPC code of foods to assess WIC eligibility as they shop—reducing the likelihood of putting the “wrong” foods in their baskets.

While WIC apps serve as a powerful tool to help simplify and improve the shopping experience for WIC participants, an app that is confusing or fails to successfully address barriers can unintentionally exacerbate them. Applying principles from behavioral design to WIC apps can further improve the shopping experience, and more importantly, help participants make the most of their WIC benefits. Working with our partners in California, we developed design recommendations rooted in behavioral insights to optimize their new WIC app. While these designs were based on California’s WIC app, they may prove useful for other state WIC programs looking to improve similar features of their apps.

Building a Better App for Finding and Purchasing WIC Foods

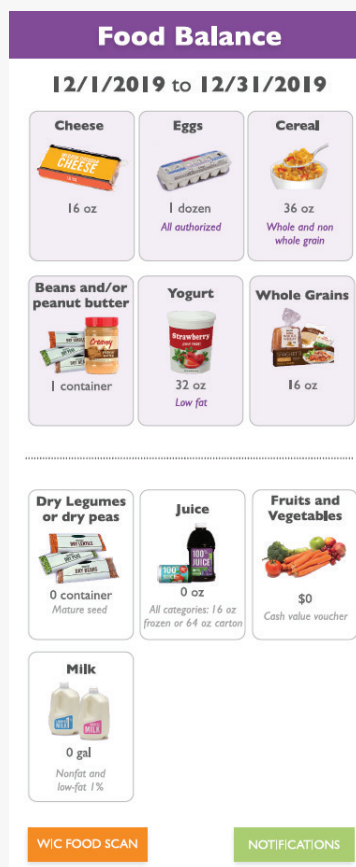
In partnership with CA WIC, our team identified five potential opportunities to enhance the CA WIC mobile app using behavioral insights. While some design suggestions are improvements on existing functionality, others are entirely new app features. We user tested these designs with 19 WIC participants and three WIC staff across three different counties in California to get their feedback. Below we discuss our final designs. It’s worth noting that California WIC has yet to implement these design concepts, but plans to explore gradually including these designs in forthcoming app updates.

⁵ <https://www.nap.edu/read/21832/chapter/4#54>

1. Increase the salience of the WIC “food balance” (remaining WIC benefits for the month)

Before WIC mobile apps, participants had to keep store receipts in order to track how much they had spent of their WIC benefits each month. When we started our work in California, the app had a “food balance” page to help participants keep track of their WIC benefits, removing the need to keep receipts. However, it was not clear to users what benefits were still available based on prior shopping. We added organization to the way the foods appear on the page so that the foods that have yet to be purchased that month appear at the top. By making the *remaining* foods in their food balance more salient, participants are able to make in-the-moment shopping decisions (e.g., can I buy this cheese with WIC today?) more easily (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Redesigned Food Balance Page



Separating out the benefits already bought makes the remaining ones more salient.

2. Add well-timed reminders to reduce the likelihood that participants forget to redeem benefits.

WIC benefits do not rollover each month, and often participants forget to redeem all of their benefits before they expire. Reminders are an important behavioral tool for tackling forgetfulness, and mobile apps can easily deploy reminders at the right moments, like a few days before benefits expire. Through user testing with CA WIC participants, we identified that participants most value reminder messages with the date and number of days until their food benefits expire. Additionally, some participants wanted to see which food types, such as vegetables or beans/legumes, remained in their balance. The California WIC app had no reminders built into its design, so we developed reminder messaging that incorporated these elements (See Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: A New Reminder



Reminder includes two key pieces: 1) date of expiration; and 2) types of food left in balance.

3. Eliminate the ambiguity of finding WIC-authorized foods, and offer sincere help when issues inevitably arise.

It can be difficult for WIC participants to select WIC-approved brands, especially when they are new to the program. To help, WIC programs often provide printed shopping guides with approved brands for participants to thumb through while shopping. This, however, can be quite cumbersome when a participant is balancing a printed guide, shopping cart, and potentially young children. To address this hassle, the California WIC app has a feature that allows participants to scan the bar code of any food item to check for WIC eligibility. However, the feature doesn't go far enough in supporting participants' shopping experience. When a participant scans an ineligible item into the app, they receive an error message, but no further direction on what to do. We identified opportunities to enhance this message and functionality. Our suggested design explains why the food item is ineligible and gives the participant "sincere help" in the form of useful follow-up actions, such as suggesting similar WIC-approved brands to buy. The feature also includes an option to send feedback to the state WIC program to consider adding the ineligible food to the state's WIC-Approved Shopping List. All of this is done in a friendly tone that normalizes that mistakes happen and WIC is there to support the participant.

4. Prompt participants to plan their grocery list

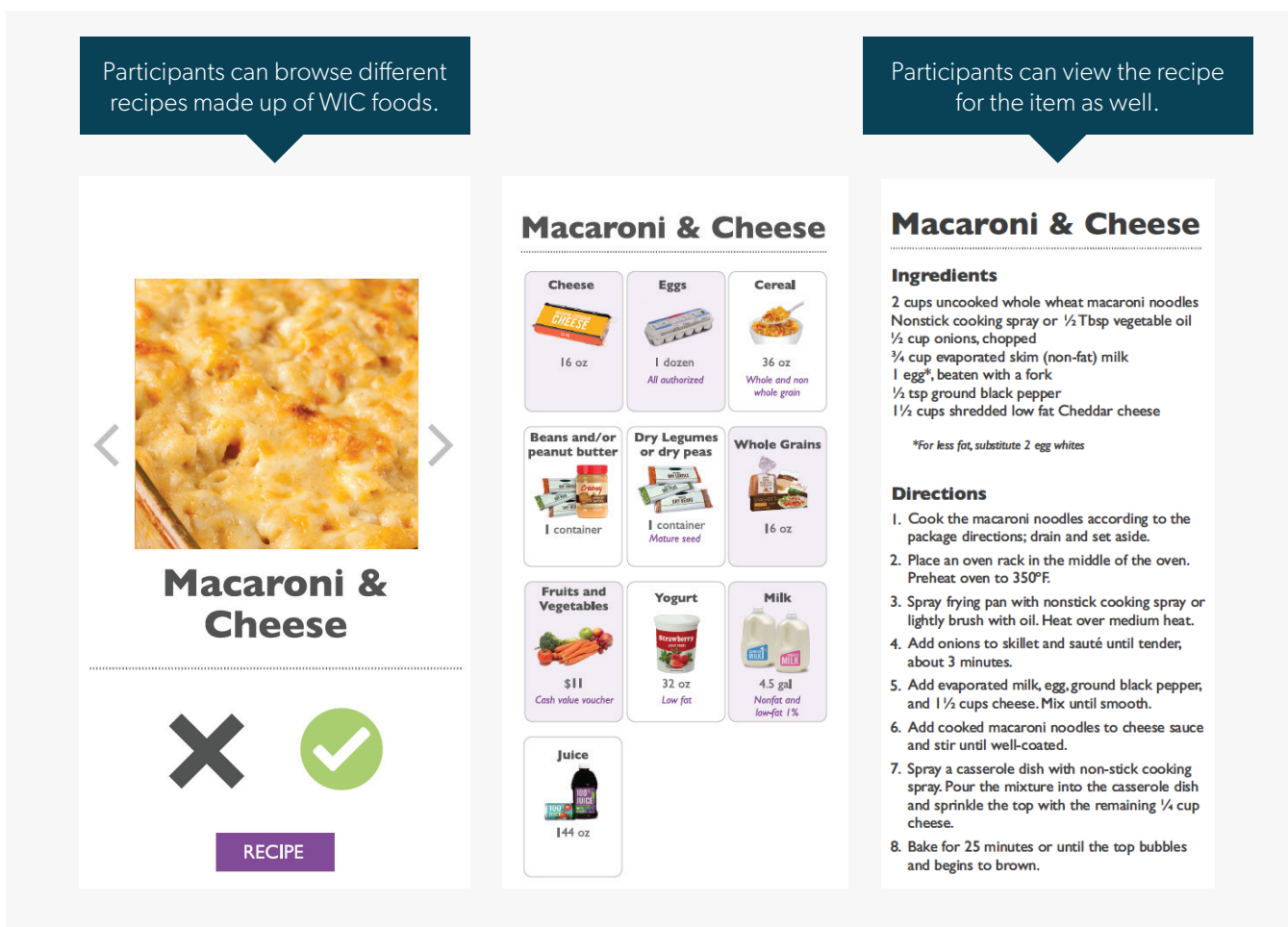
WIC participants face several choice sets during the shopping experience. Participants first have to choose from 10-14 different categories of WIC foods and then, within each category, make several additional choices about which size, type, and brand of the food item to buy. While the California WIC mobile app allowed participants to click through different categories of foods to explore all of the available sizes, types, and brands they could buy, making these choices in the moment while shopping is stressful.

We designed a shopping list that allows participants to create their own personal list from scratch in advance of shopping, and check off foods from their list as they add them to their cart in the store—allowing them to not only plan more effectively, but also track their list easier in the moment while shopping to ensure they are maximizing their benefits during that shopping trip.

5. Inspire participants to try new WIC foods or to use WIC foods in new ways.

One of the perks of WIC is that the food benefits cover a variety of different kinds of foods—from meats to beans, and various types of vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. Despite the wide range of food options, participants, like many of us, can get into food ruts and serve the same foods to their families. During user testing, participants expressed a desire to learn new ways to use WIC foods, but weren't sure where to find recipe ideas that made use of WIC-authorized foods. After unearthing this insight, we felt the California mobile app could be helpful for inspiring participants to try something new, and potentially redeem more of their benefits in that process. We created an additional tool, the Food Finder, that allows participants to scroll through different recipes, see the corresponding items in their food balance, and view the recipe while they prepare it (See Figure 3 below).

Figure 3: Inspirational “Food Finder”



Concluding Thoughts

The shopping experience can greatly influence whether a participant redeems their benefits or continues using WIC. It is important that WIC participants feel this experience is as easy and stress-free as possible. While new WIC mobile applications play an important role in achieving this outcome, they are not in themselves enough. Our work with California WIC showcases some design concepts that exemplify the ways behavioral design can play an important role in improving WIC mobile apps. Strategies informed by behavioral science, such as making critical information more salient, including timely reminders, and eliminating ambiguity and offering sincere help to participants, can make meaningful enhancements to these apps. While sometimes just a small tweak, designs informed by behavioral science can help participants feel less stress and more success while shopping.