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The Farmers' Market Effect

Tanya Parker-Pope, New York Times

Vouchers that permit low-income women to shop at a local farmers' market increase fruit and vegetable consumption in poor families, a new study shows.

The research, published this month in the American Journal of Public Health, comes just as states are making important changes to national nutrition programs. For years, the federally-funded Women, Infants and Children (W.I.C.) program, which subsidizes food purchases for low-income women and young children, hasn't included fruits and vegetables, except for fruit juice and carrots for breastfeeding women. After a push by health groups and a recent report from the Institute of Medicine, the United States Department of Agriculture in December revised W.I.C. to include monthly subsidies for fruits and vegetables. States will begin implementing the new rules in February.

Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles tracked the eating habits of 602 area women taking part in the federal W.I.C. program. Some of the women were given \$10 in weekly vouchers for vegetable and fruit purchases at a nearby farmers' market or supermarket, while a control group received coupons for non-food products in exchange for sharing information about eating habits. After six months, women who shopped at the farmers' markets were eating about three additional servings of fruits and vegetables a day, compared to the control group. Supermarket shoppers consumed 1.5 extra servings.

It's not clear why mothers visiting a farmers' market wound up buying more vegetables than grocery store shoppers, but some women told the researchers that the produce sold at markets seemed to be fresher and of higher quality than supermarket offerings. Many shoppers also said they enjoyed the pleasant community experience and the chance to interact directly with growers, the authors noted.

While this latest report shows that subsidizing fruit and vegetable purchases can make a big difference in eating habits among low-income people, it also suggests that the new amounts recently approved for W.I.C. fall far short of what is needed. The U.C.L.A. study gave women \$10 a week, while the W.I.C. program will provide monthly vouchers worth \$8 to each recipient and \$6 to each child. Breastfeeding women will receive just \$10 a month toward fruits and vegetables.

Farmers' Market Vouchers Boost Produce Consumption Among WIC Participants, Study Finds California Healthline

A study in this month's *American Journal of Public Health* suggests that participants in the federal Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) consume more fruits and vegetables when they are given produce subsidies to use at farmers' markets and supermarkets, the *New York Times* reports. To evaluate the efficacy of produce subsidies, University of California-Los Angeles researchers followed 602 local participants in the federal Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) for one year. Across the first six months, women in the intervention group received \$10 in weekly vouchers to purchase produce from a nearby farmers' market or supermarket, while those in the control group received coupons for non-food items in exchange for information about their eating habits. The researchers report that participants in the intervention group increased their fruit and vegetable consumption and sustained the increase six months after the coupons were suspended. Specifically, when compared with control group participants, women shopping at farmers' markets ate an additional 1.4 servings of produce per 1,000 calories and those shopping at supermarkets ate an additional 0.8 servings per 1,000 calories. Although the data do not indicate why mothers shopping at farmers' markets bought the most produce, some women reported finding fresher, higher quality produce at farmers markets. Others said they enjoyed the community experience and opportunity to interact directly with growers. The *Times* suggests that, while the findings reinforce the positive impact of produce subsidies on fruit and vegetable consumption, they also indicate that vouchers provided by the WIC program may not offer enough support to boost produce consumption. Even after new guidelines take effect in February, the WIC program will offer monthly produce vouchers of \$10 for breastfeeding mothers, \$8 for all other mothers and \$6 for each child per month, compared with \$10 a week provided during this study. The researchers, meanwhile, point out that the findings indicate that WIC participants value fresh fruits and vegetables and suggest that increasing their accessibility will increase participants' consumption

Dena R. Herman, Gail G. Harrison, Abdelmonem A. Afifi, Eloise Jenks. Effect of a Targeted Subsidy on Intake of Fruits and Vegetables Among Low-Income Women in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. *AJPH*. 98(1):98-105.

Objectives. Intake of fruits and vegetables protects against several common chronic diseases, and low income is associated with lower intake. We tested the effectiveness of a subsidy for fruits and vegetables to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

Methods. Women who enrolled for postpartum services (n=602) at 3 WIC sites in Los Angeles were assigned to an intervention (farmers' market or supermarket, both with redeemable food vouchers) or control condition (a minimal nonfood incentive). Interventions were carried out for 6 months, and participants' diets were followed for an additional 6 months.

Results. Intervention participants increased their consumption of fruits and vegetables and sustained the increase 6 months after the intervention was terminated (model adjusted R²=.13, P<.001). Farmers' market participants showed an increase of 1.4 servings per 4186 kJ (1000 kcal) of consumed food (P<.001) from baseline to the end of intervention compared with controls, and supermarket participants showed an increase of 0.8 servings per 4186 kJ (P=.02).

Conclusions. Participants valued fresh fruits and vegetables, and adding them to the WIC food packages will result in increased fruit and vegetable consumption.

<http://www.ajph.org/cgi/reprint/98/1/98>