

VERMONT WIC

ACTIVE PARTICIPANT SURVEY 2020

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Introduction and Background

The Vermont WIC program surveys participants annually to solicit feedback and plan for quality improvement. In 2018, a core set of participant survey questions was developed with focus in the following areas: Customer Satisfaction, Scheduling, Breastfeeding, WIC Shopping, and Nutrition Education. The core set of questions was vetted with the Vermont Department of Health Survey Review Committee and prioritized with input from District Office WIC staff and the State WIC team. It is a web-based survey administered via text.

The 2020 survey included all the core questions and expansions in some sections. These included questions on race, ethnicity, and preferred spoken language. The survey was administered in the midst of the COVID-19 public health emergency. Therefore, feedback on remote appointments during COVID-19 and input into planning for WIC's eventual reopening for in-person appointments were also included. In 2019, the WIC program collaborated with the University of Vermont and, with approval from both the University and Vermont Agency of Human Services Institutional Review Boards, additional research questions at the end assessing food security and diaper use were included. These research questions were again included in the 2020 survey. Associations between the answers to these questions and survey respondent characteristics will be analyzed in a separate research study and are not included in this report.

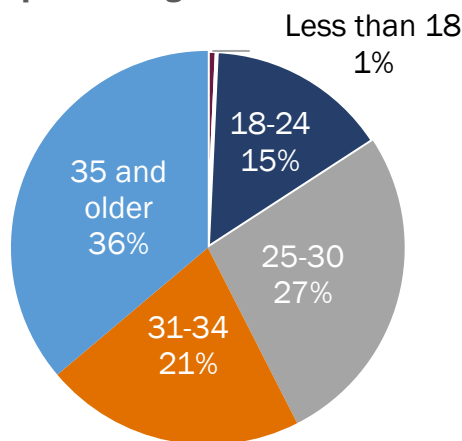
On August 19, 2020, the survey link was texted to 7,187 cell phone numbers of households that were active on WIC as of August 18, 2020 and opted into WIC's texting service. About 95% of WIC households accept texts from WIC. A reminder text was sent on August 26, 2020.

The survey had 960 responses, with a 75% completion rate. The response represents approximately 13% of active WIC households.

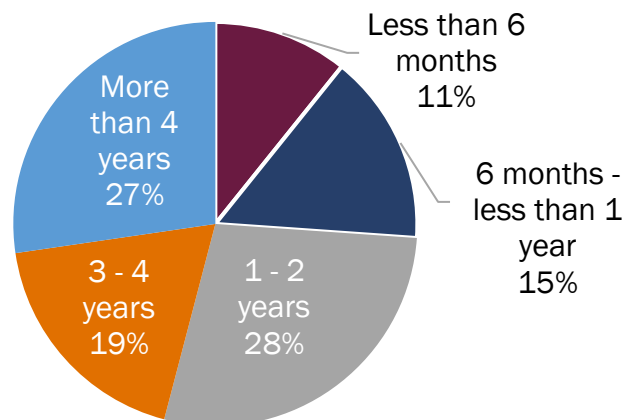
Demographics

Over half (57%) of the respondents were age 31 and older. Seven respondents were under 18 years old and, due to being under the age of a legal adult, were opted out of completing the rest of the survey. Respondents represented a mix of total length of time participating in the program.

Respondent Age



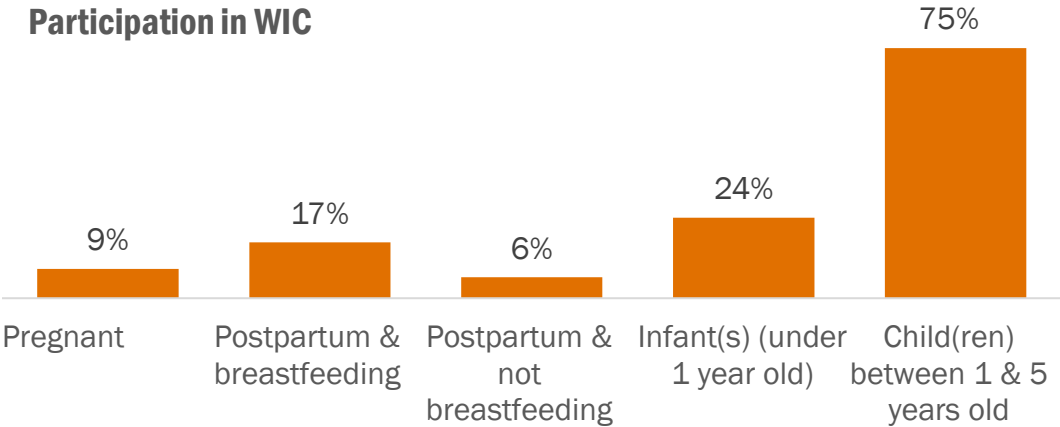
Length of Family Participation in WIC



Most respondents identified as white, Non-Hispanic (82%). English was selected as the preferred spoken language by 93% of respondents. The next most reported language was Nepali (3%), and all others were reported by one percent or fewer of respondents.

Race	Percent
White, Non-Hispanic	82%
Hispanic/Latinx	3%
Asian	5%
Black or African American	5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	<1%
Some other race	<1%
Prefer not to answer	5%

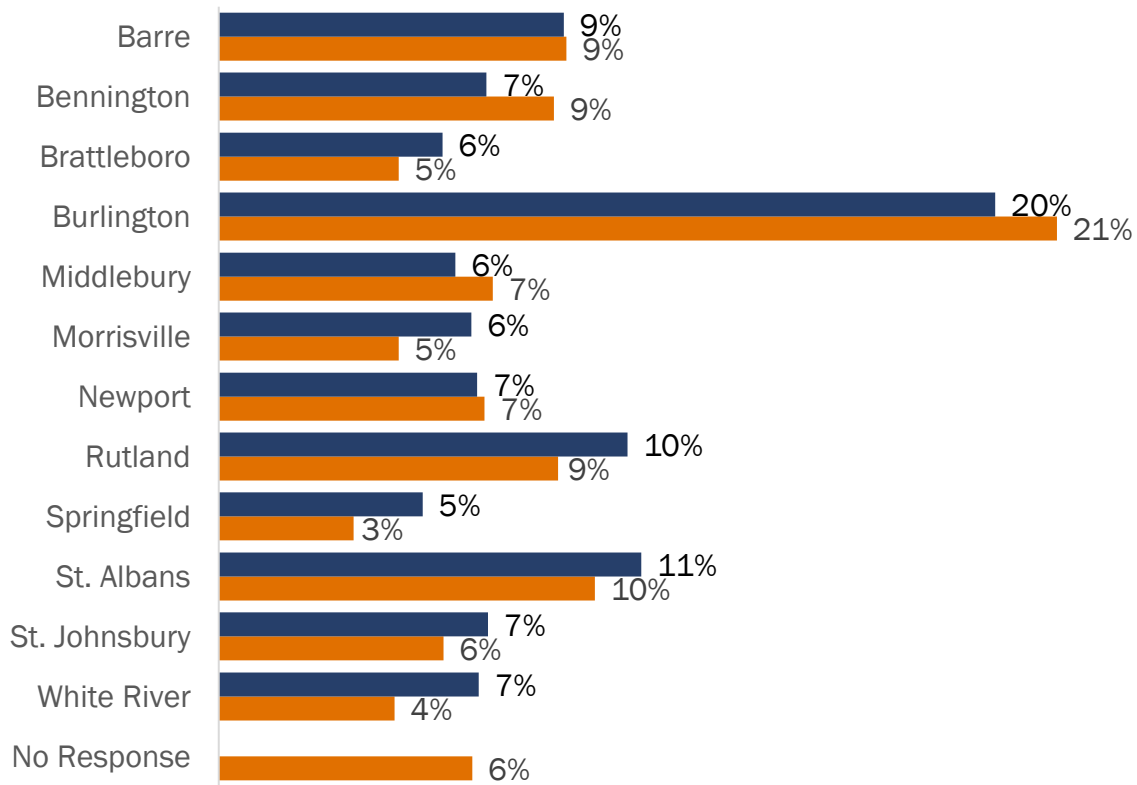
The majority of respondents (75%) had a child aged 1-5 participating in WIC. One in three respondents participated in WIC while pregnant or postpartum. (Note: survey respondents were able to check all categories that applied to their families, percentages do not add 100%). Over half (57%) had children between 2 and 5 years old, 31% had children between 1 and 2 years old, and 32% had infants less than 1 year old.



Survey responses were geographically spread across the state, with a higher proportion of respondents from the local WIC programs with higher caseloads. The number of survey responses from each region correlates to the number of active participants. Six percent of respondents did not provide a town name.

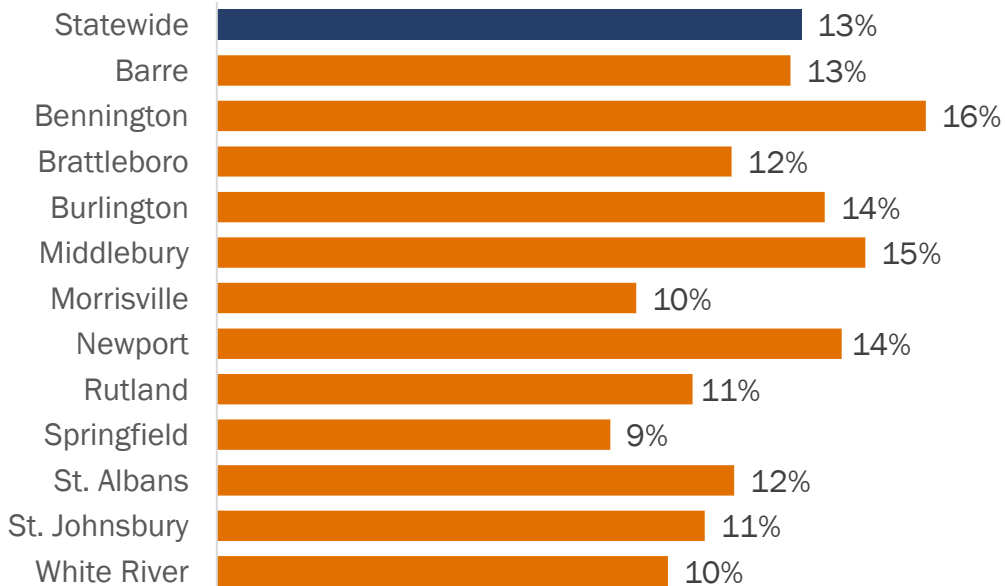
Geographic Distribution of Response
by District Office

■ Percent of Total Active Families
■ Percent of Total Responses



Bennington, Middlebury, Burlington, and Newport District Office response rates were above the Statewide rate.

Response Rate by District Office

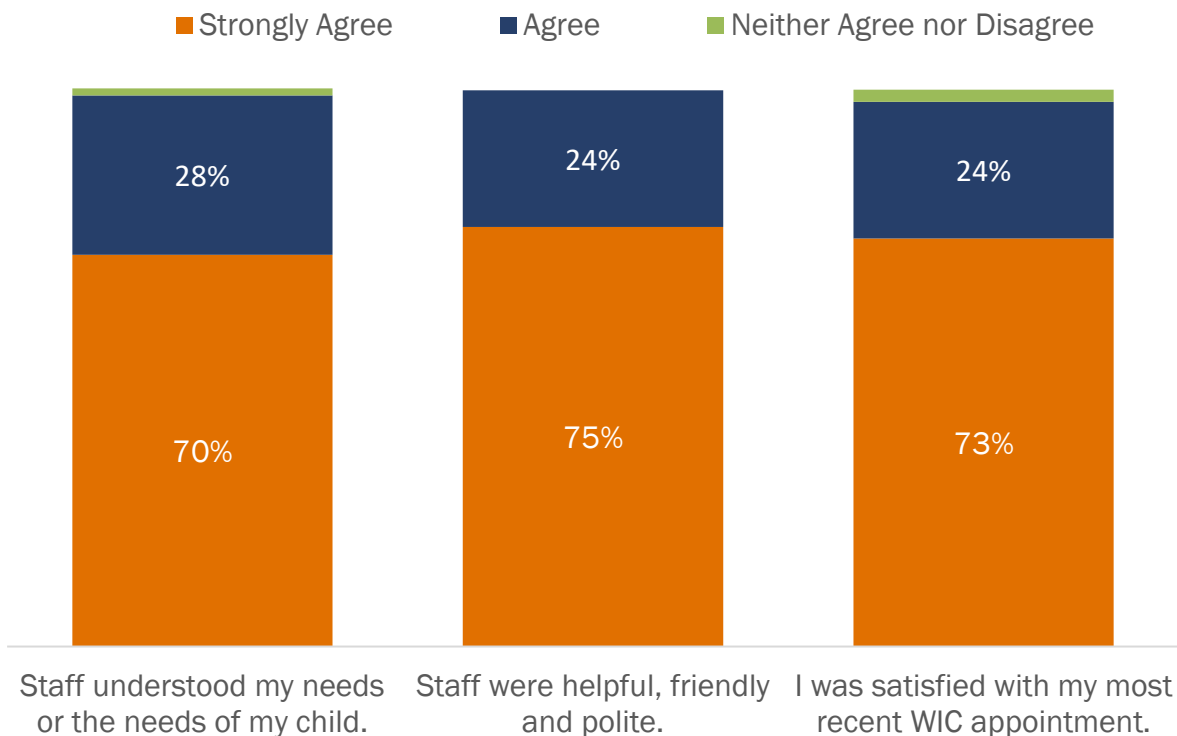


Customer Satisfaction

The survey asked a series of questions related to customer satisfaction with their most recent clinic appointment, clinic staff, and the program overall. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, WIC appointments have been conducted only by telephone since mid-March 2020.

Over 97% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that at their last WIC appointment staff took the time to understand the needs of their child, were helpful, friendly and polite, and were satisfied with their most recent visit. Those who disagreed or strongly disagreed totaled less than 5 respondents and are not represented in the chart below.

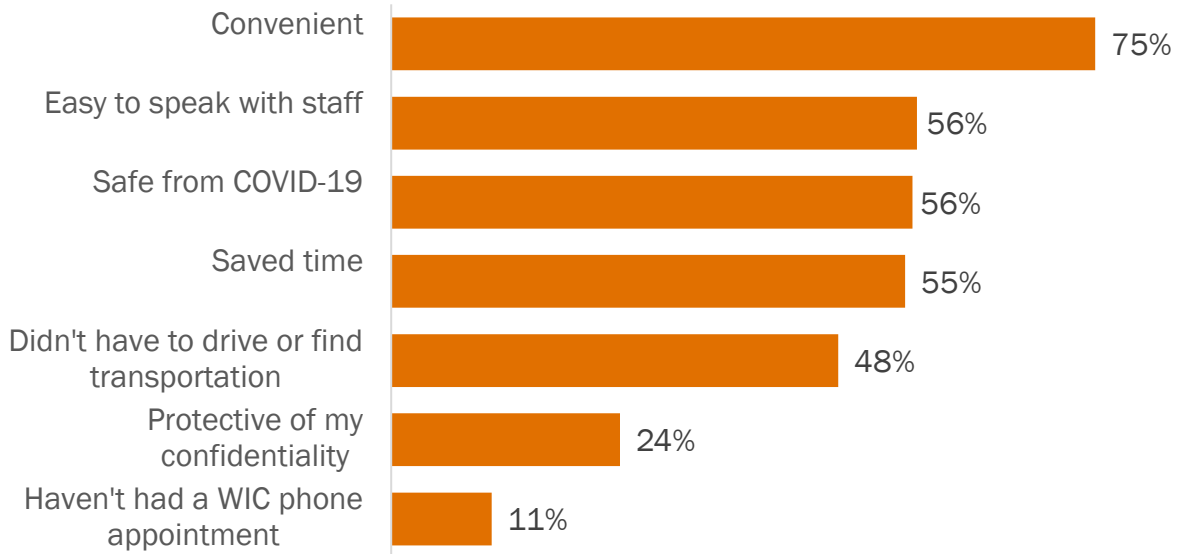
Satisfaction with WIC Appointments



Respondents were asked what they liked about their WIC appointment by phone. Three-quarters (75%) selected it was convenient, and just over half of respondents selected it was easy to speak with staff (56%), kept them safe from COVID-19 (56%), and saved time (55%). When asked what the program could do to improve WIC appointments by phone, 56% selected having measurements from the doctor in advance and 41% selected adding video.

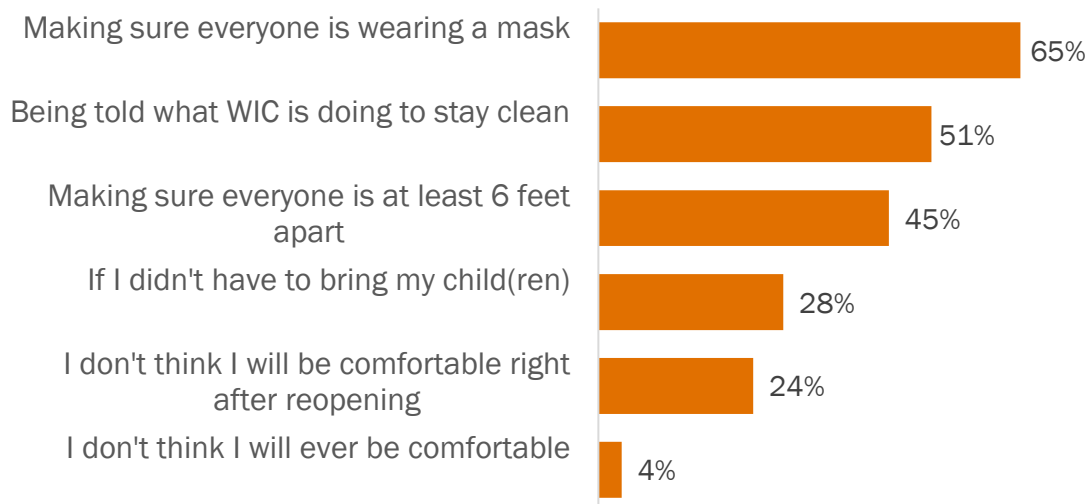
“Safe, virus free, convenient, saved time, respectful, and friendly!”

What did you like about your WIC phone appointment?



To better understand steps Vermont WIC can take when reopening to in-person appointments, the survey asked what the program can do to help families feel comfortable returning to the clinic environment. Ensuring everyone is wearing a mask and being informed of what WIC is doing to stay clean were the top answers at 65% and 51% respectively. Almost one quarter (24%) stated they won't be comfortable returning to in-person appointments right after reopening WIC clinics. There were just over 130 open comments to this question. Approximately one-third of these comments indicated they would be ready to return to in person clinic at the time the survey was taken.

What would make you comfortable returning to a WIC clinic when it reopens in the future?



When participants were asked what they liked best about the WIC program, most participants (90%) selected WIC Foods. Other top choices included nutrition information, learning about my child’s growth and development, and farmers’ market coupons.

The survey provided an opportunity for open comment regarding the parts of the WIC program participants like. A theme identified in the open comment was support from WIC staff.

“Having friendly informative WIC employees to work with is wonderful! Especially being a first time mom, it’s important to me to feel comfortable with the person we have an appointment with. Great people!”

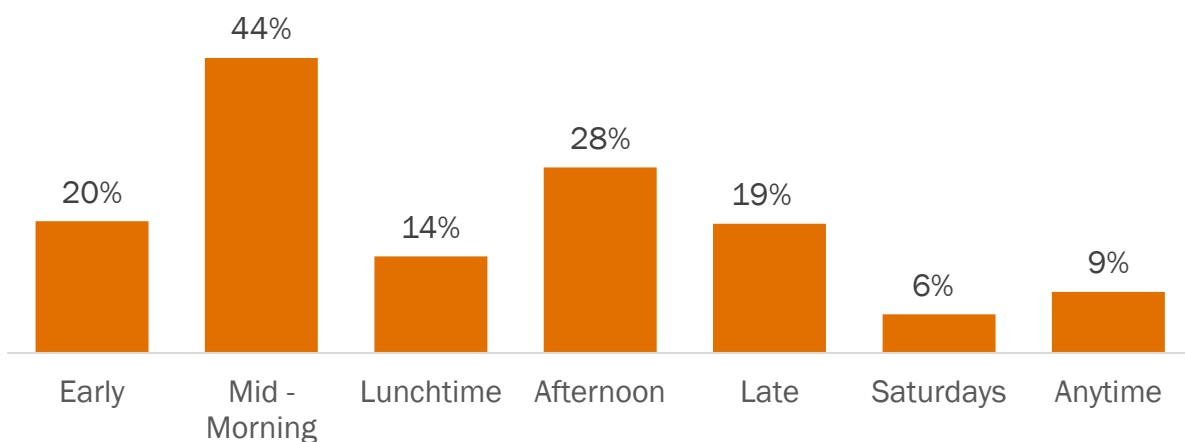
“Supportive staff helps me feel less anxious and like they really care.”

What do you like about WIC?	
WIC foods	90%
Nutrition information	69%
Learning about my child’s growth and development	61%
Farmers’ Market coupons	61%
Getting information about other programs and services that help my family	48%
Nutrition activities and classes	35%
Finding out my child’s iron level	34%
Breastfeeding support	31%

Scheduling

Staying connected with WIC through a certification appointment is a critical piece of active participation. The survey asked questions related to scheduling and making appointments to better understand the needs of families. Mid-morning was the most popular choice of appointment time at 44%, followed by afternoon at 28%. A small percentage (6%) selected Saturdays.

I prefer my WIC appointments to be scheduled:



Forty percent preferred scheduling a week or two in advance of an appointment and about one quarter (26%) of respondents preferred scheduling their next appointment 6 months in advance (at the time of their last appointment). Eleven percent preferred to schedule a same-day

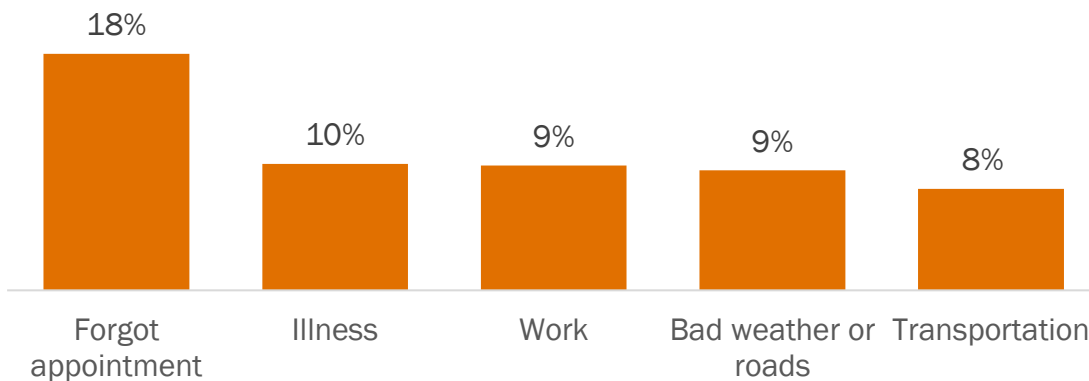
appointment, while 17% preferred the option to either schedule in advance or have a same-day appointment. The remaining 4% of respondents preferred to either walk-in or call when it works for them, or did not schedule appointments at all.

Regardless of the scheduling method, 72% reported not having difficulty scheduling an appointment. Reasons for difficulty are listed in the table below.

Reasons for Scheduling Difficulty:	
I forgot to call to make an appointment.	11%
I didn't receive a reminder letter, text, or phone call.	11%
The clinic hours don't work for my schedule.	8%
I called to schedule but couldn't get a time that worked for me.	6%

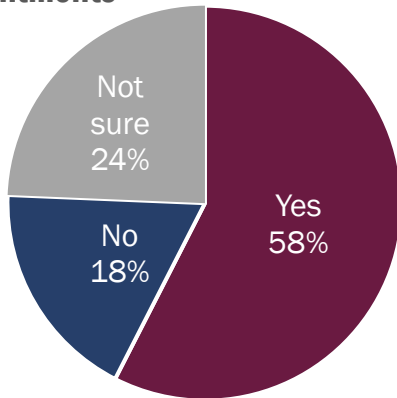
Approximately 64% of respondents did not miss any WIC appointments. For those that have, reasons include forgetting the appointment, illness, bad weather or roads, work schedule, or lack of transportation.

Reasons for missed WIC appointments

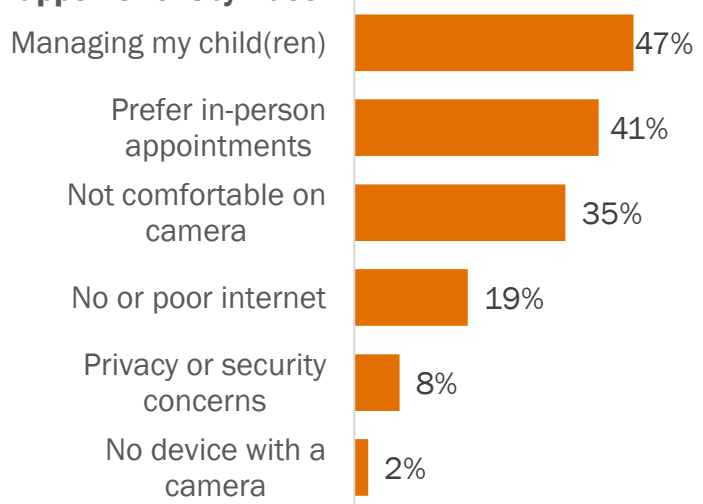


The survey asked about interest in completing WIC appointments by video. Over half, 58%, were interested. This is an increase from 36% interested in 2019. The number one reason for *not* being interested in video appointments was managing children during the appointment (47%), followed by a preference for in-person appointments. Almost one-fifth (19%) reporting no or poor internet connection. A preference for phone appointments was noted in some open comments.

Interest in WIC Video Appointments



Why do you not want to do your WIC appointment by video?

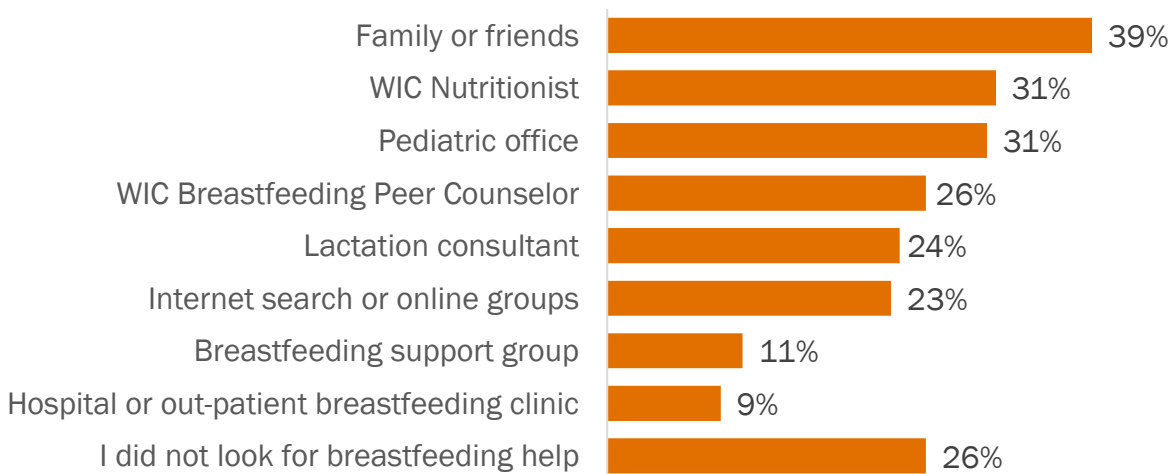


Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is defined as providing breastmilk by feeding the baby at the breast and/or expressing breastmilk and providing it to the baby in a bottle or cup. Thirty-five percent of respondents (285 respondents) breastfed within the last 6 months of their completion of the survey. The following section is based on the answers from this subset of respondents.

To better understand how new parents in WIC are accessing breastfeeding support during COVID-19 and limited in-person contact, the survey asked questions about how and where participants are finding help. Approximately one in four respondents (26%) did not look for breastfeeding help. For those that did, the most common place was from family and friends (39%), followed by a WIC nutritionist and the pediatric office, both at 31%.

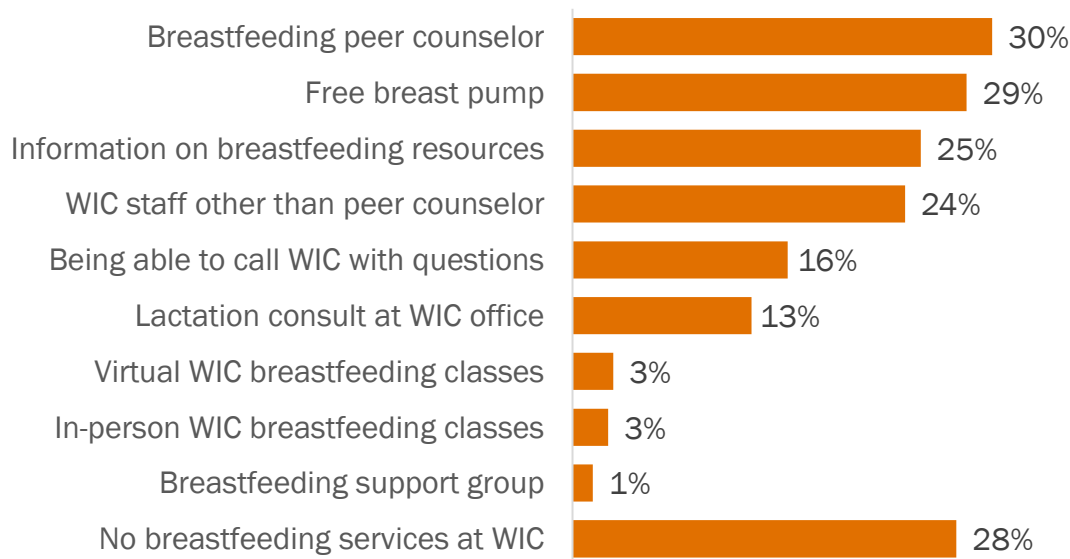
Where did you find breastfeeding help?



Nearly three in four (73%) reported receiving in-person help and 4% reported receiving virtual lactation support. At WIC, breastfeeding peer counselors, free breast pumps, information on

breastfeeding resources, and WIC staff were selected as top supports by respondents. Three in four (75%) respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with breastfeeding services offered through WIC.

Which of the following breastfeeding services at WIC helped you?



While many commented that no improvements to the breastfeeding services offered through WIC were needed, some noted in the open comment that a return to in-person support would be helpful.

“Reopening the office would be the biggest help, I think it’s easiest to learn in person from a lactation consultant when breastfeeding support is needed.”

“In person breastfeeding support when pandemic is over.”

Thirty-seven percent of respondents who had breastfed within the last six months of their completion of the survey received a breast pump through WIC. Based on this subset of respondents, 74% percent received an electric breast pump, 41% received a manual pump (it is possible to receive both from WIC). Eighty-nine percent of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the breast pump program.

WIC Shopping

Participants were asked a series of questions about the WIC shopping experience. Vermont WIC completed rollout of eWIC in 2016, transitioning from an over forty-year history of home delivering the WIC food package to purchasing it in grocery stores using an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card. Given the mix of total length of time participating in WIC among survey respondents, some have experienced both methods of accessing the food benefit, while others have only accessed the food benefit in the retail environment.

Because WIC shopping can be complicated in the beginning, local WIC staff focus on this topic in depth at the initial enrollment appointment. The chart below shows different activities clinic staff engage in with participants. Eighty-five percent of respondents reported that they received a

current WIC Foods Guide. The other activities may happen at appointments early on in a family's time on WIC, but less frequently if a family is experienced and confident with the shopping process. In 2018, Vermont WIC developed and released a series of WIC Shopping videos that are meant to be texted to new participants and anyone having trouble shopping. Thirty-three percent of respondents reported being told about or shown the WIC Shopping videos.

At my clinic appointment, WIC staff:



The survey asked about the use of different resources when shopping for WIC foods. Seventy percent of respondents reported always or usually checking their current WIC foods balance. Relying on shelf tags, a new answer choice in 2020, was the next most commonly used resource with 60% of respondents using them. Using the WIC Foods Guide was the next most commonly used resource followed by the WIC Shopper app. Thirty-four percent of respondents never use the WIC Shopper App and 13% reported not knowing what the WIC Shopper App was or how to use it. About one-third (33%) of respondents reported hearing about WIC Shopping videos which is expected because there is a focus on sharing them with families who are brand new to the WIC program.

When shopping for WIC foods at the grocery store, how often do the following things happen?



For those who never used the WIC Shopper app, 25% reported not knowing about it, 12% didn't have cell service inside the store, 9% didn't use it because it is not connected to their WIC account, and 9% reported the app uses too much data.

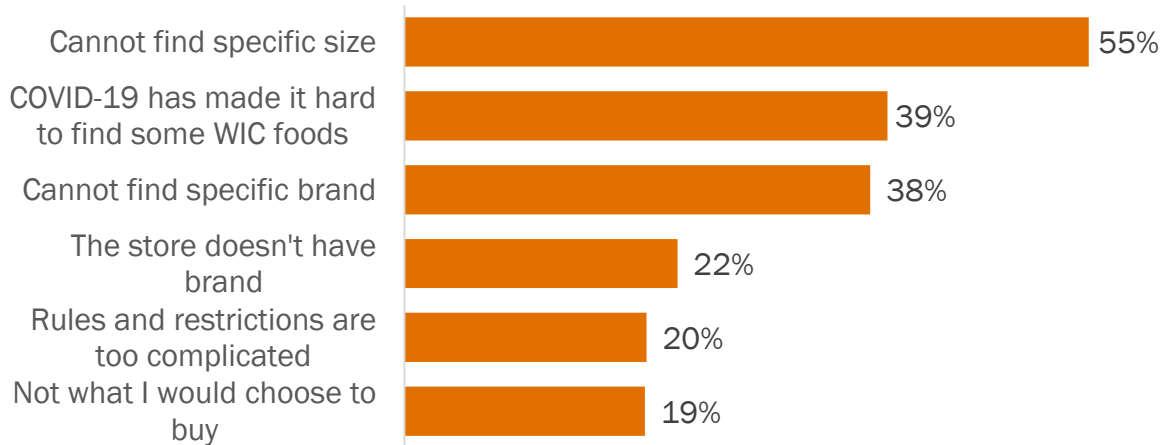
For those who never used the WIC Foods Guide, the most common answer as to why not was respondents didn't feel they needed one (14%). In the open comments, respondents reported knowing the items they usually buy, so the Guide wasn't needed, or they relied on WIC labels on shelf tags.

"I know the foods, but have one in case I do need to look something up."

"Sometimes tag on the shelf indicating WIC food is incorrect."

Forty-two percent responded they do not have trouble finding any WIC foods. If participants have had challenges, the most common one was being unable to find the correct size (55%). Thirty-nine percent responded that COVID-19 has made it hard to find some WIC foods. Themes that emerged in the open comments include inadequate or nonexistent shelf tagging, challenges with specific products, and WIC-approved products declining at the register due to system issues.

Challenges finding some WIC foods



Similar to last year’s survey, whole wheat bread, 48 oz. juice, yogurt, cold cereal, and 64 oz juice were the top five most challenging to find WIC foods.

Top 5 Most Challenging to Find WIC Foods

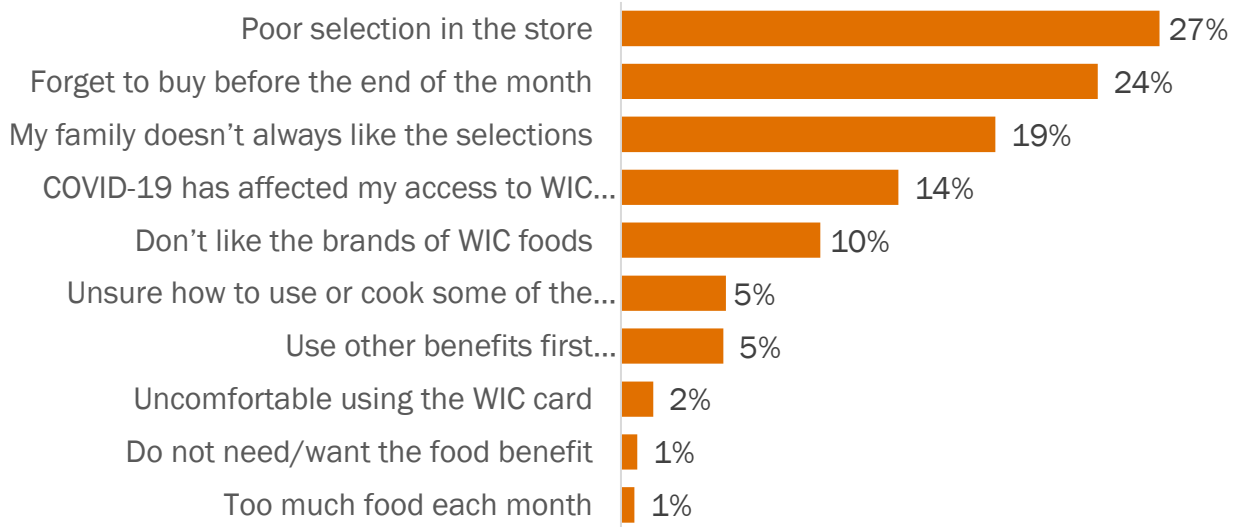
Whole Wheat Bread	27%
48 oz. Juice	20%
Yogurt	17%
Cold Cereal	12%
64 oz. Juice	11%

Less than half (43%) responded that they buy all of their WIC food each month. This was a drop from the 2019 survey where 55% reported purchasing all WIC foods. Poor selection in the store (27%), forgetting to purchase all foods before the end of the month (24%), and not liking the selections (19%) were the top reasons for not buying all their WIC foods each month.

In the open comment, a top theme that emerged was respondents choosing to not purchase foods in specific food categories, either because they are hard to find or they are not liked by their families.

“Usually buy everything except all the milk- we don’t go through as much as given.”

Reason why not all WIC foods are bought each month



Nutrition Education

A cornerstone of the WIC program is nutrition education. Families complete a nutrition activity twice per year in between clinic appointments, and these can be done online at wichealth.org, or at in-person group or one-on-one activities. Completion of this nutrition activity is connected to continued food benefit issuance. Beginning in mid-March, Vermont WIC operated under a federal waiver allowing food benefits to be issued regardless of completion of nutrition education. Most respondents (72%) have completed an activity in the past. This was a drop from 2019 where 80% reported completing a nutrition activity.

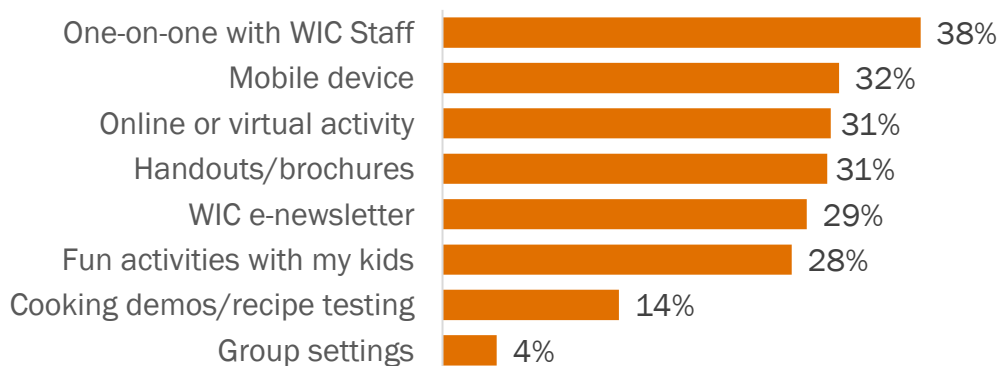
Participants are interested in a variety of nutrition education topics related to nutrition and other health behaviors. The most popular topic was “Child nutrition” was selected by almost half (46%) of respondents, followed by “Tips for stretching a household food budget” (36%) and “How to maintain a healthy weight or losing weight” (35%). The full list is summarized in the table below.

Nutrition & Health Topics	
Child nutrition	46%
Tips for stretching a household food budget	36%
How to maintain a healthy weight or losing weight	35%
Physical activity and active play for kids and families	30%
How to cook with WIC foods	26%
Ways to choose more vegetables and fruits	22%
Dental health	21%
Shopping for WIC/healthy foods	20%
Food safety	16%
Infant feeding	13%
Breastfeeding	9%

Lead and other environmental health topics	8%
Immunizations	8%
Healthy pregnancy	7%
Returning to work and breastfeeding/pumping	5%
Quitting smoking, alcohol, or other drugs	4%

When asked, “What are your favorite ways to get your nutrition information from WIC?”, one-on-one with WIC staff was the top answer selected by 38% of respondents. “On my mobile device” the top answer in 2019 was selected by 32% of respondents, a drop from 52%.

Favorite ways to get your nutrition information from WIC

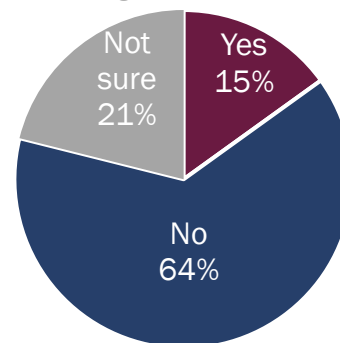


When asked more specifically which WIC nutrition activity they choose to do in between appointments, the overwhelming majority chose WIChealth.org (65%), Vermont WIC’s online education platform.

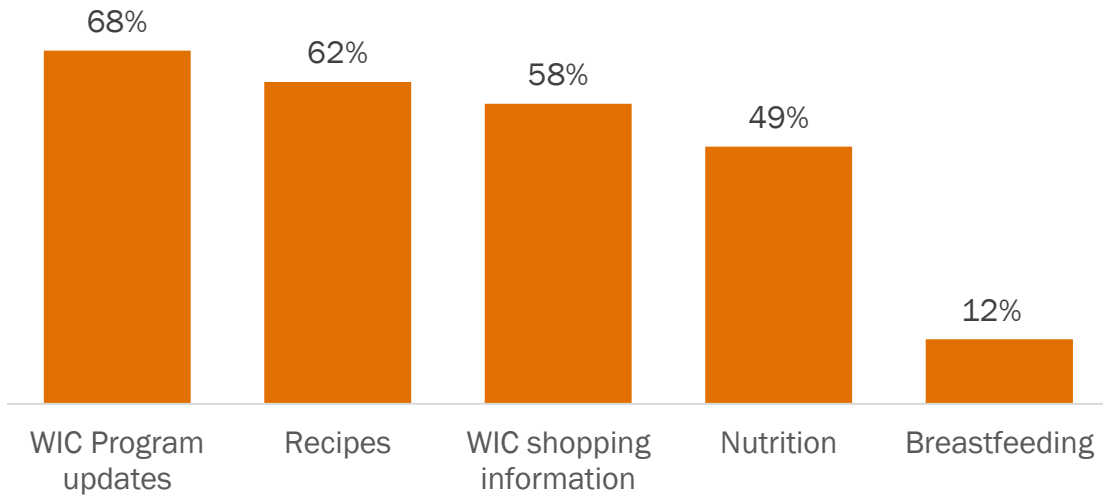
Vermont WIC pivoted during COVID-19 to provide online nutrition activities with the need to limit in-person interactions, therefore questions were asked to better understand interest and barriers in these options. Fifteen percent responded with interest in these nutrition education opportunities.

In 2020, specific questions were asked about WIC’s e-newsletter, *Strong, Healthy and Happy*. Vermont WIC transitioned from a quarterly mailed paper newsletter to a monthly e-newsletter in the summer of 2019. Over half, 60% responded they read the e-newsletter. Preferred content includes WIC program updates (68%), recipes (62%), and information about WIC shopping (58%). For the 40% that reported not reading the e-newsletter, the most common reason why not was not having received it (64%). Not having time or checking email infrequently were commonly noted in the open comments as other reasons for not reading it.

Interested in live WIC virtual/online group nutrition or breastfeeding activities



Which topics do you find most helpful in the WIC e-newsletter: Strong, Healthy and Happy?



When asked, “What health changes has WIC helped you make?” the top answers were eating more fruits and vegetables (54%), eating more whole grains (37%), and trying new foods (33%). Thirteen percent of respondents reported that WIC has not helped make any of the health changes provided in the answer choices. Open comments reflected WIC reinforcing healthy choices respondents and their families were already making, either by providing nutritious foods and/or by support from WIC staff.

“It has helped me maintain a fairly healthy diet despite a drop in my income.”

Program Improvements

About 40% of survey respondents (391) answered the question, “If you could make one suggestion for the WIC Program, what would it be?” Of those responses, 119 were encouragements to keep the program working as is or expressions of gratitude. Of the remaining suggestions provided, some are not within Vermont WIC’s control at this time (e.g. additional money for fruits and vegetables and expanding the program for children older than five). The most frequent comments fell into the theme of changes to the food package. In addition to the suggestion to increase money for produce, additional food package suggestions include adding different protein options, increasing the variety of options, decreasing some food categories, increasing local and organic options, and having more options in some food categories (e.g. more gluten free whole grain choices).

“I wish the food benefits were a little more customizable.”

“Ensure the stores are up to date with the accepted foods and that the computer systems register the food items at check out.”

Related to accessing the WIC food benefit, the next most common theme included suggestions for improving the shopping experience. These suggestions included connecting the WIC Shopper App to a family’s current balance, allowing WIC transactions at self-checkouts, and improving shelf tagging and identification of WIC foods.