

VERMONT WIC

ACTIVE PARTICIPANT SURVEY 2021

Table of Contents

Introduction and Background..... 2

Demographics..... 2

Customer Satisfaction..... 5

Scheduling..... 7

Breastfeeding.....10

WIC Shopping.....12

Nutrition Education.....16

Technology Use.....18

Program Improvements.....19

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 2021 survey included core questions and expansions in some sections. The survey was administered in the midst of the COVID-19 public health emergency. Therefore, feedback on remote appointments and expanded WIC food options during COVID-19 and input into planning for WIC's eventual reopening for in-person appointments were also included. Finally, questions on access to the internet were included to plan for increased opportunities for families to connect with WIC via telehealth.

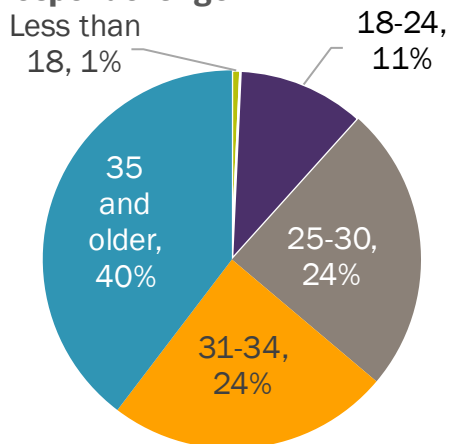
On August 5, 2021, the survey link was texted to 7,075 cell phone numbers of households that were active on WIC as of August 2, 2021 and opted into WIC's texting service. About 97% of WIC households accept texts from WIC. A reminder text was sent on August 12, 2021.

The survey had 686 responses, with an 80% completion rate. The response represents approximately 9% of active WIC households.

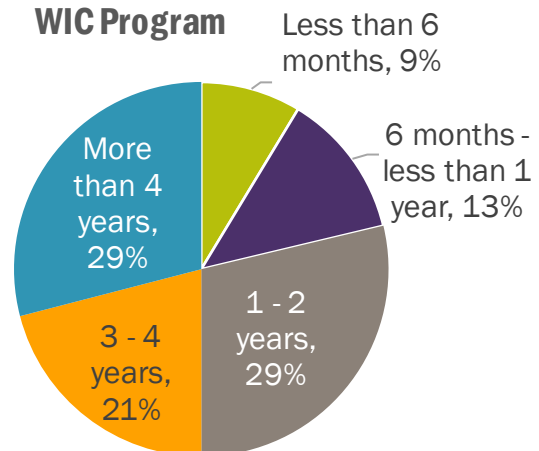
Demographics

Almost half of respondents (49%) were between 25 and 34 years old, and 40% were 35 and older. Less than 1% of respondents were under 18 years old and were not offered the rest of the survey due to their age. Just over three quarters of respondents (79%) have participated in WIC for at least one year; the remaining respondents would have joined WIC during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respondent Age



Participation in the WIC Program

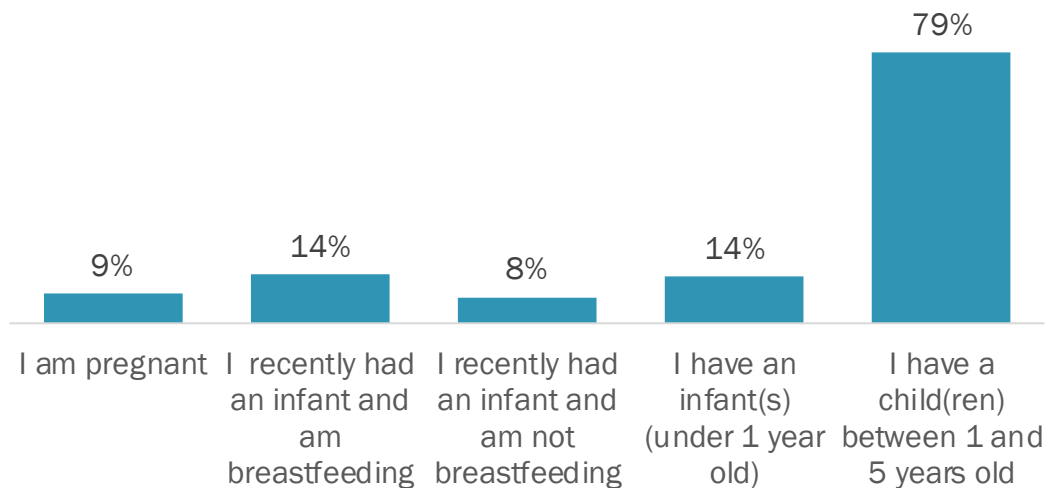


Most respondents identified as white, Non-Hispanic (82%). English was selected as the preferred spoken language by 93% of respondents. The next most reported language was Nepali (4%), and all others were reported by one percent or fewer of respondents.

Race & Ethnicity	Percent
Non-Hispanic/Latinx:	
White	84%
Asian	5%
Black or African American	4%
Multiple or some other race	4%
Hispanic/Latinx	3%

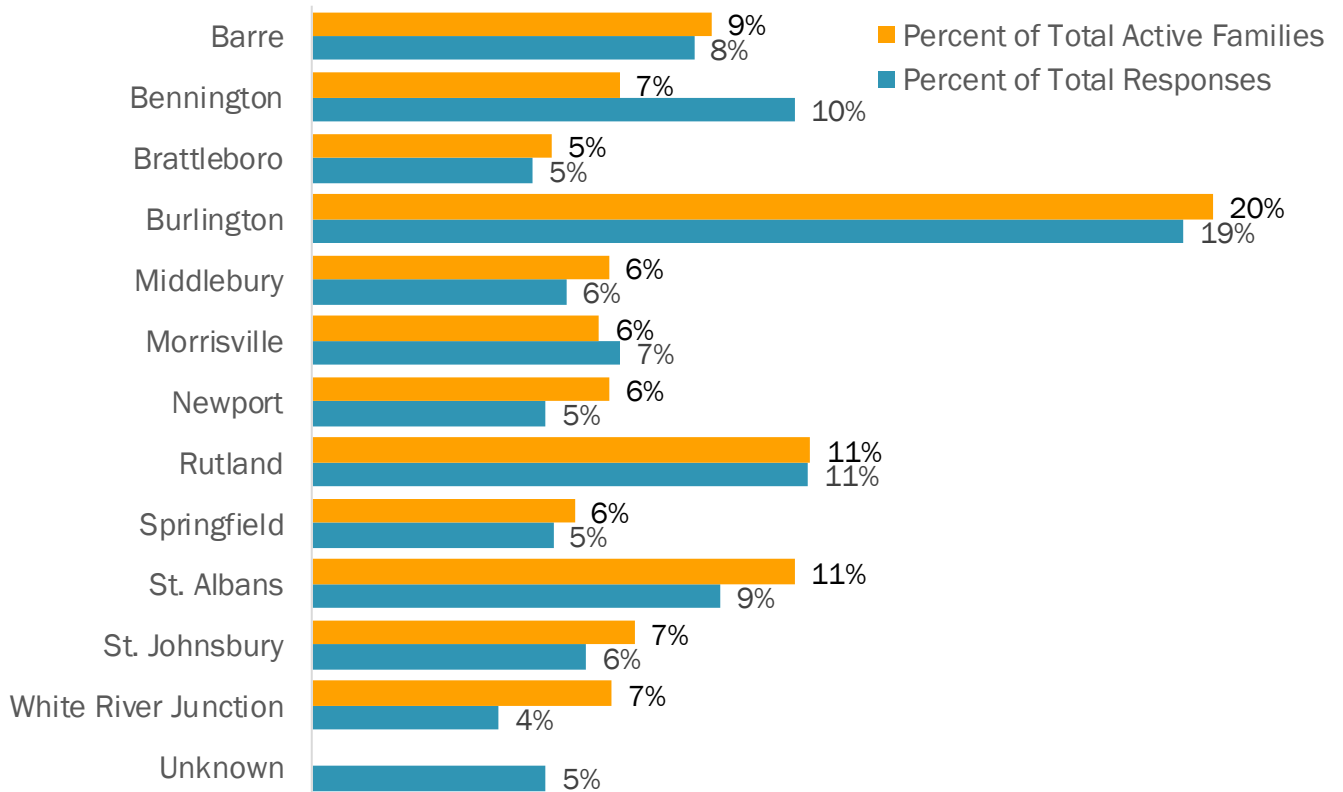
The majority of respondents (79%) had a child aged 1-5 participating in WIC. One in three respondents participated in WIC while pregnant or postpartum. (Note: survey respondents were able to select all categories that applied to their families, so percentages do not add up to 100%).

Participation in WIC



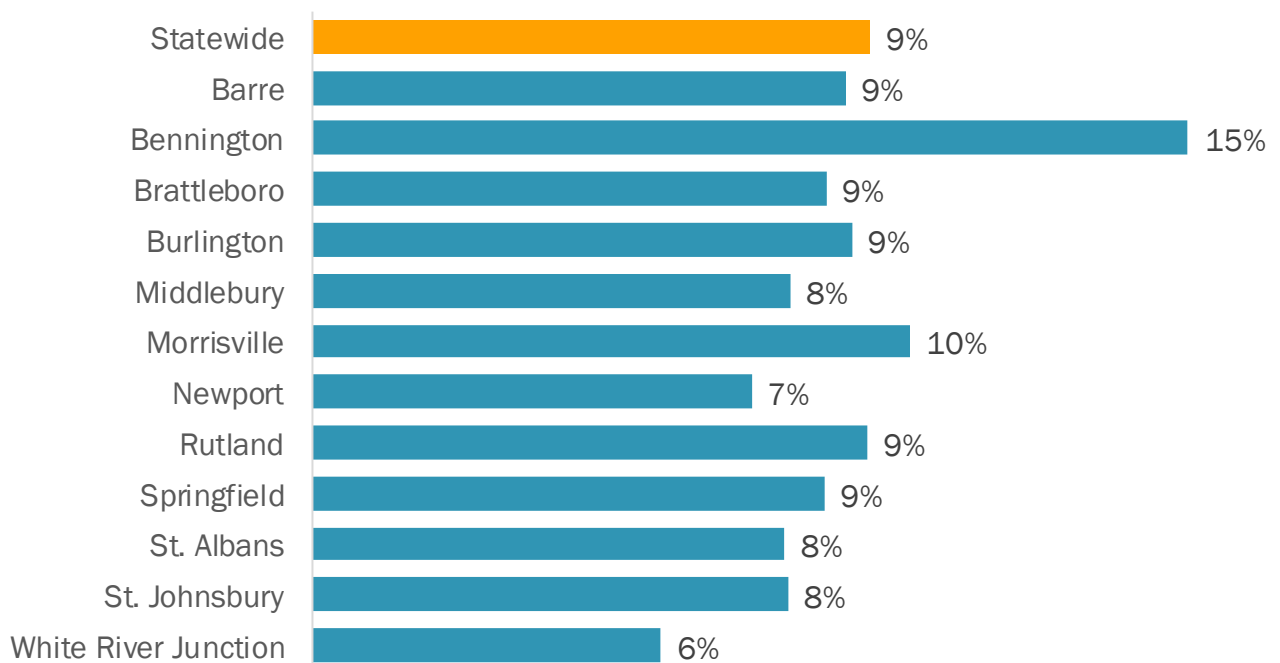
Survey responses were geographically spread across the state, with a higher proportion of respondents from the local WIC programs with higher caseloads. The distribution of respondents by region was similar to the distribution of active WIC participants by region. Five percent of respondents did not provide a town name. Bars in the chart below are not even in some instances due to percentage rounding.

Geographic Distribution of Responses by District Office



Bennington and Morrisville District Office response rates were above the Statewide rate.

Response Rate by District Office

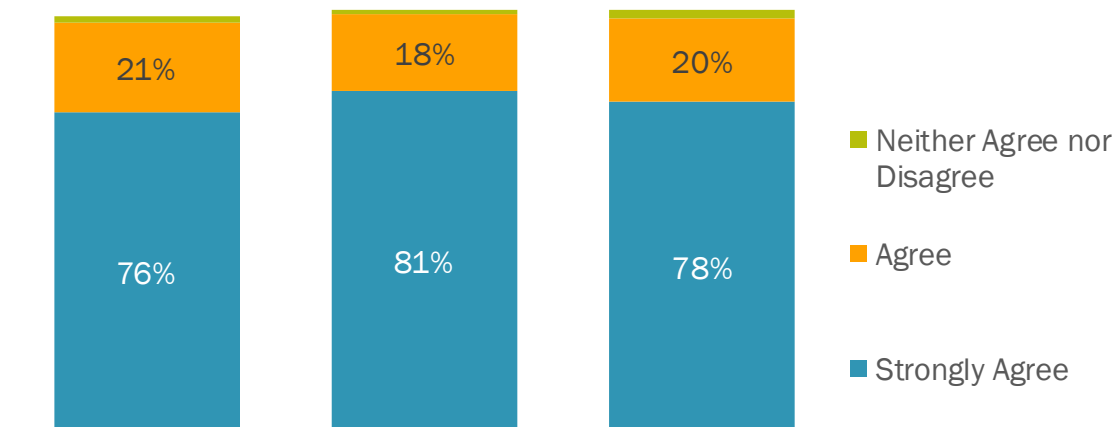


Customer Satisfaction

The survey asked a series of questions related to customer satisfaction with respondents' 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.

Satisfaction with WIC appointments overall remain high, as in past years, even with all WIC appointments occurring by phone. At least 97% of respondents strongly agreed or 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 10 respondents and are not represented in the chart below.

Satisfaction with WIC Appointments

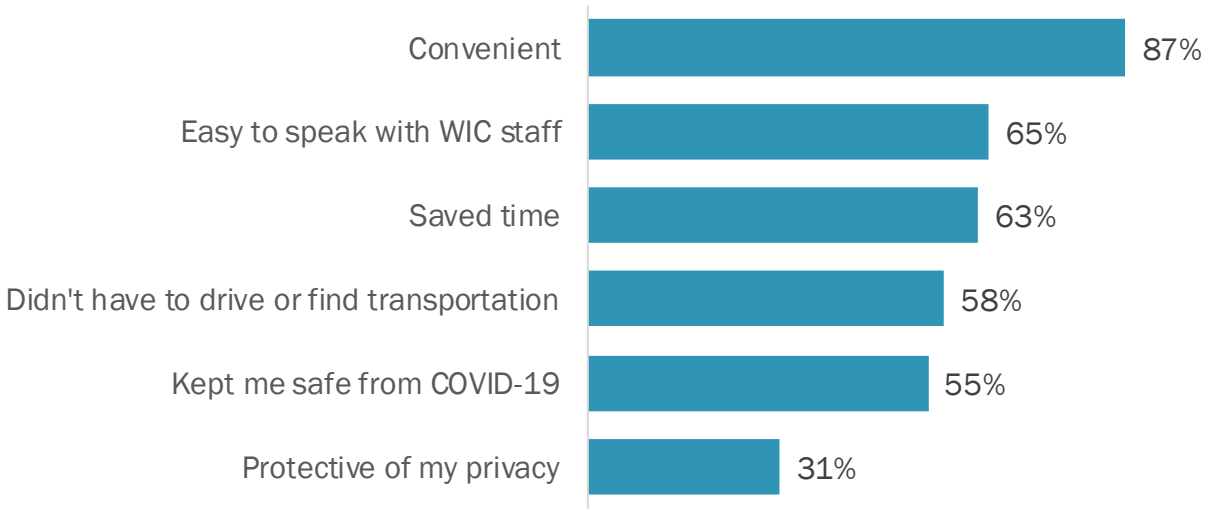


Staff members took time to understand needs. Staff were helpful, friendly and polite. Satisfied with recent WIC appointment.

Respondents were asked what they liked about their WIC appointment by phone. Almost 9 out of 10 (87%) selected it was convenient, 65% of respondents selected it was easy to speak with staff and 63% selected it saved time.

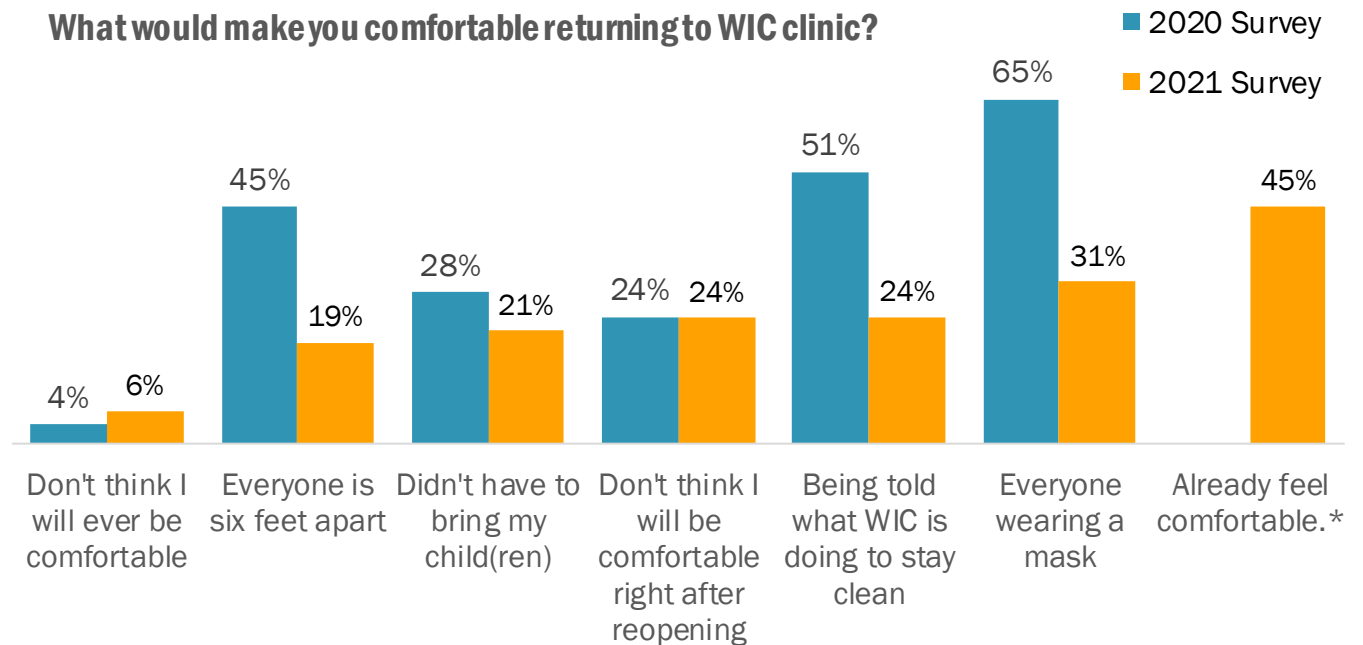
“Much easier with multiple kids not to have to try to bring them all to an appointment. Even beyond the protection for them from COVID... it was very helpful!”

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. Almost half of respondents, 45%, stated they already felt comfortable returning to in-person appointments. Two COVID-19 prevention measures, ensuring everyone is 6 feet apart and wearing masks, were selected by a smaller proportion in 2021 than in 2020. Also, approximately half as many respondents said they needed to be told what WIC was doing to stay clean in 2021 as in 2020.

What would make you comfortable returning to WIC clinic?



*Option was not available in the 2020 Participant Survey

There were 74 open comments to being asked what would make them comfortable. Several responses indicated vaccination, either for staff, children, or both, would increase comfort in returning to in-person appointments. Approximately one-third of these comments reflected families' desire to keep the telephone appointment option, regardless of COVID-19, due to the convenience and decreased stigma in accessing the program.

“Considering the appointment is mainly questions, it’s so much easier to do over the phone. It saves so much time, especially with not wasting time driving to and from the appointment.”

When participants were asked what they liked best about the WIC program, most participants (91%) selected WIC Foods. Other top choices included nutrition information, farmers’ market coupons, and learning about their child’s growth and development.

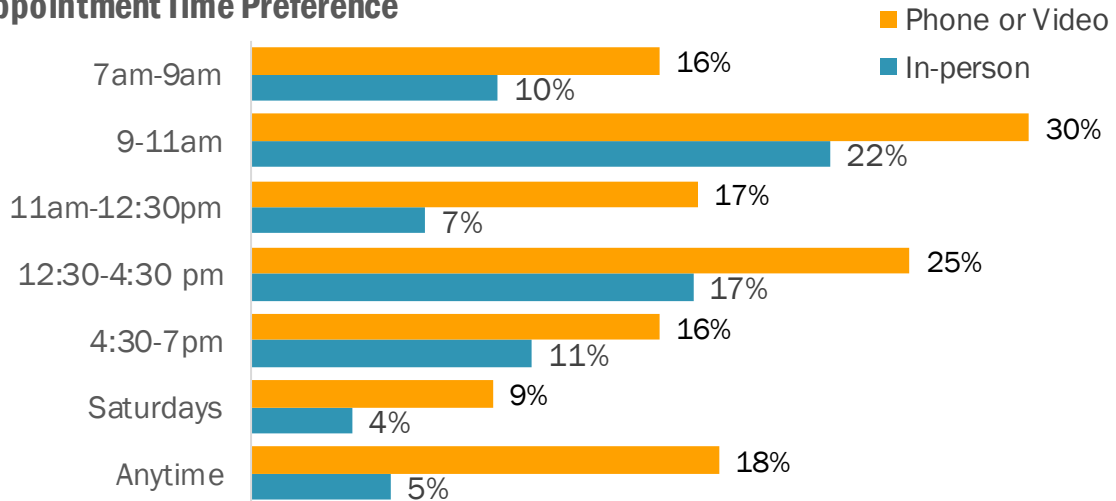
What do you like about WIC?	
WIC foods	91%
Nutrition information	67%
Farmers’ Market coupons	62%
Learning about my child’s growth and development	54%
Getting information about other programs and services that help my family	47%
Nutrition activities and classes	35%
Breastfeeding support	34%
Finding out my child’s iron level	30%

“Support of talking to another experienced person about my child’s development. I have a picky eater and the staff always has great tips to help me get creative to increase the different foods she is willing to eat.”

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. Respondents had had the option to choose more than one answer on preferred times for WIC appointments. Mid-morning was the most popular choice of appointment time, followed by afternoon. A small percentage selected Saturdays. Overall, respondents indicated greater availability for phone or virtual appointments than in-person appointments.

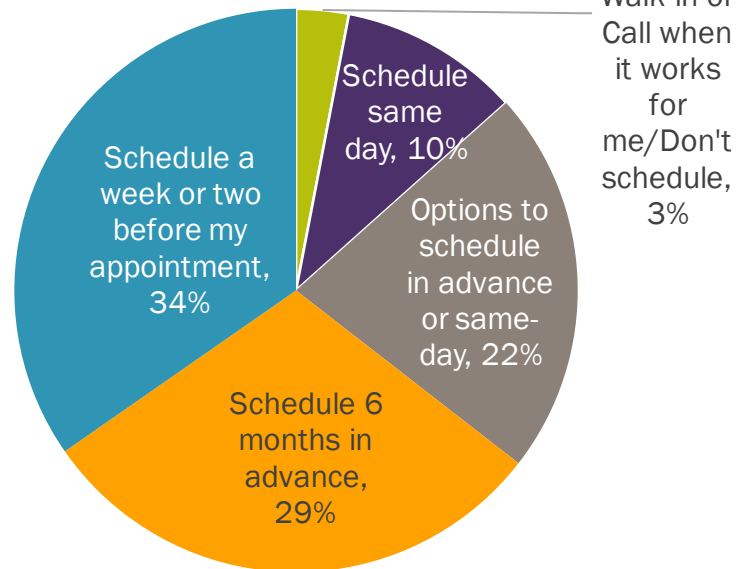
WIC Appointment Time Preference



Thirty-four percent preferred scheduling a week or two in advance of an appointment and 29% of respondents preferred scheduling their next appointment 6 months in advance (at the time of their last appointment). Ten percent preferred to schedule a same-day appointment, while 22% preferred the option to either schedule in advance or have a same-day appointment. The remaining 3% of respondents preferred to either walk-in, call when it works for them, or did not schedule appointments.

Regardless of the scheduling method, 77% of respondents reported not having difficulty scheduling an appointment. Reasons for difficulty are listed in the table below.

Appointment scheduling preference

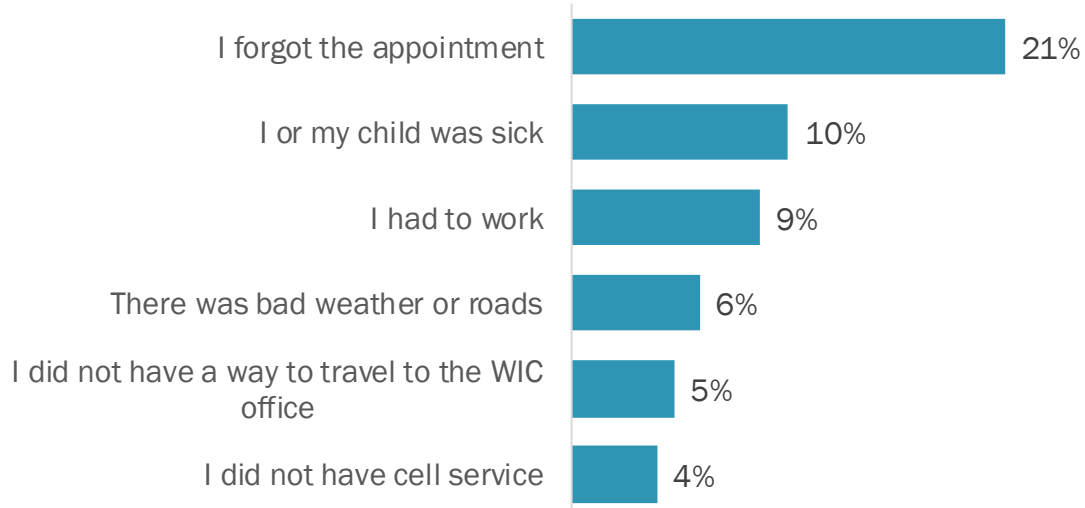


Reasons for Scheduling Difficulty:

I forgot to call to make an appointment.	9%
I didn't receive a reminder letter, text, or phone call.	8%
The clinic hours don't work for my schedule.	7%
I called to schedule but couldn't get a time that worked for me.	3%

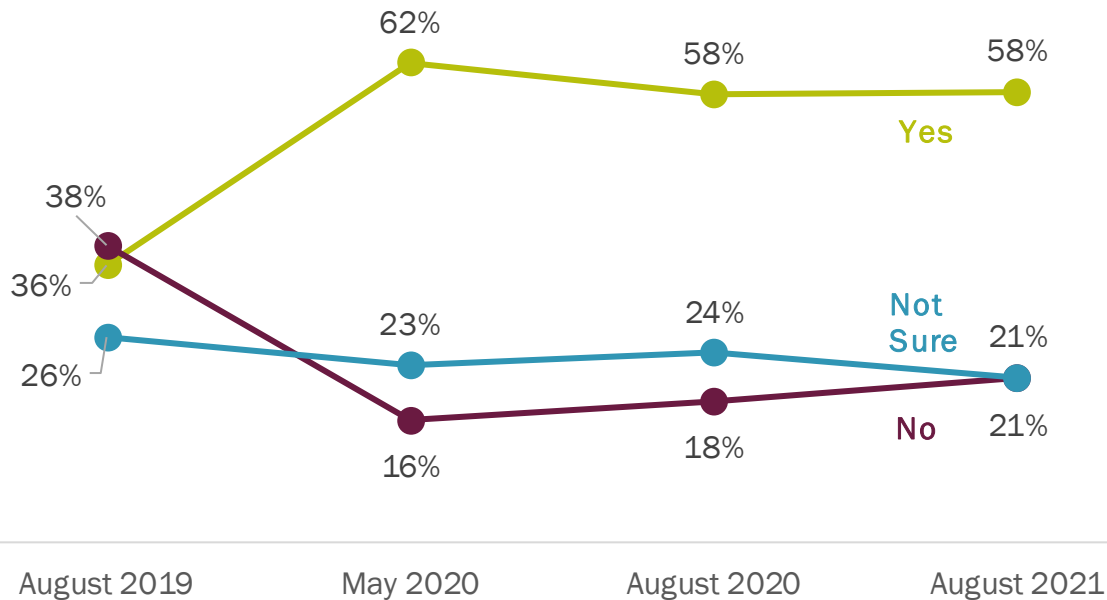
Approximately 66% of respondents did not miss any WIC appointments. For those that did miss appointments, reasons include forgetting the appointment, illness, work schedule, bad weather or roads, or lack of transportation or cell service.

If you have ever missed any WIC appointments in the past (in-person or by phone), what are the reasons?



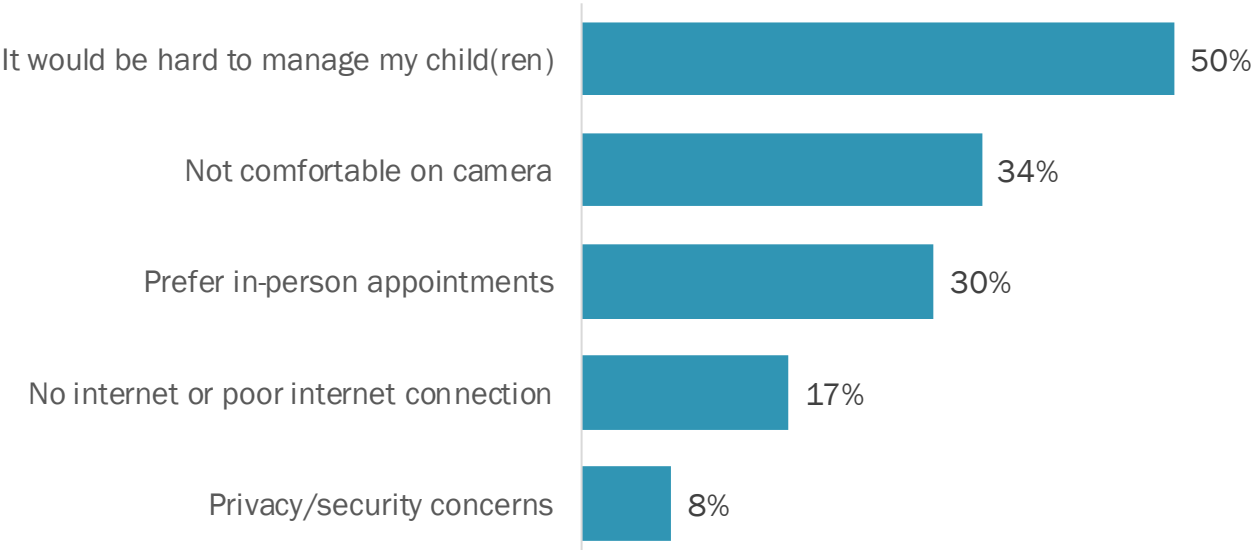
The survey asked about interest in completing WIC appointments by video. Over half (58%), were interested. This level of interest has held steady since 2020 after an increase from 36% interested in 2019.

Interest in WIC Video Appointments



The number one reason for *not* being interested in video appointments was managing children during the appointment (50%), followed by not being comfortable on camera and a preference for in-person appointments.

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

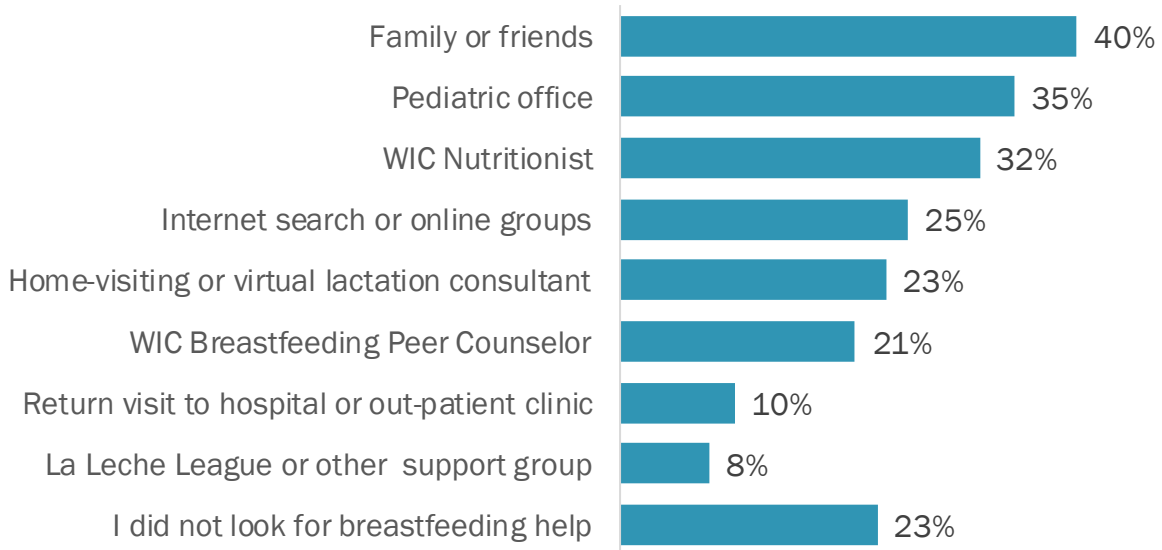


Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is defined as giving human milk by feeding the baby at the breast and/or pumping or expressing human milk and giving it to the baby in a bottle or cup. Forty-two percent of respondents (253 respondents) breastfed within the last 12 months of their completion of the survey. The following section is based on the answers from this subset of respondents.

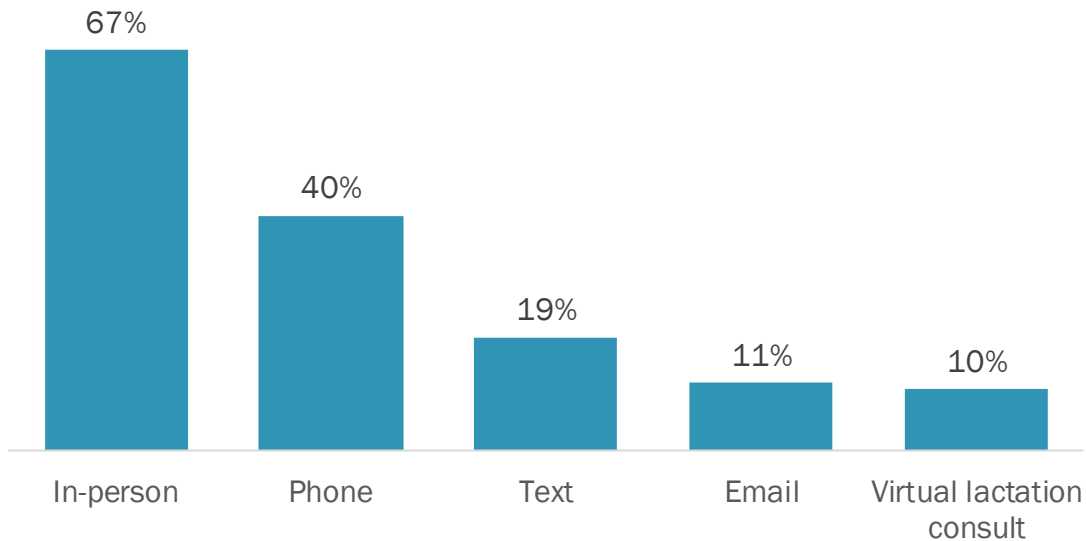
To better understand how new parents in WIC are accessing breastfeeding support during COVID-19 and limited in-person contact, survey questions asked about how and where participants are finding help. The most common source of help was from family and friends (40%), followed by the pediatric office (35%) and a WIC nutritionist (32%). Approximately one in four respondents (23%) did not look for breastfeeding help.

Where did you find breastfeeding help?



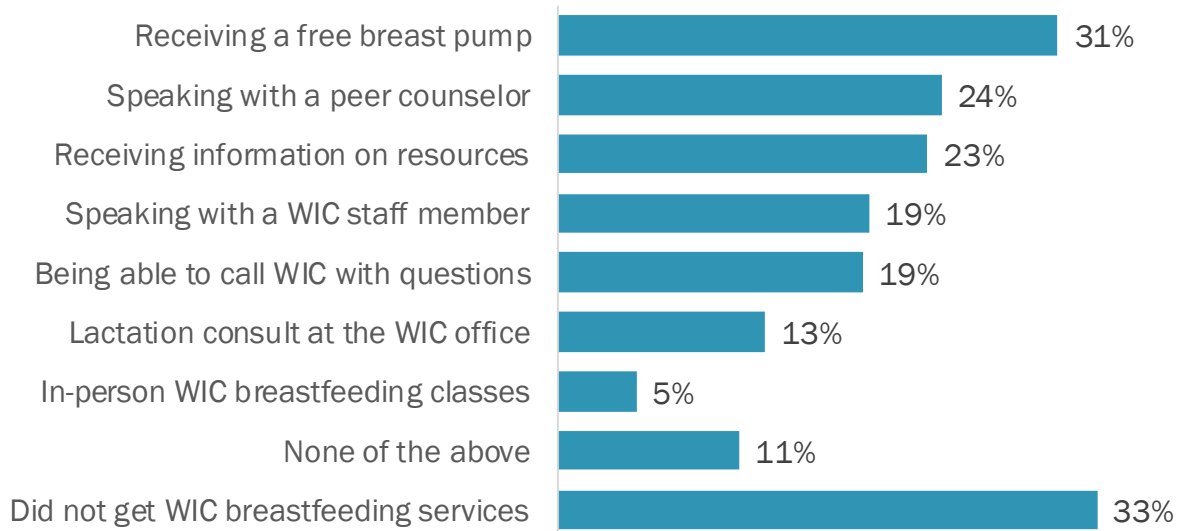
Two-thirds (67%) reported receiving in-person breastfeeding help, 40% by phone, 19% by text, 11% by email, and 10% by virtual lactation consult.

How did you receive breastfeeding support?



Seventy percent of respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with breastfeeding services offered through WIC. Accessing free breast pumps, breastfeeding peer counselors, information on breastfeeding resources, and WIC staff were supports most selected by respondents. Sixty-five percent of respondents have ever received a breast pump through WIC.

Which of the following WIC breastfeeding services helped you?



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 range 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.

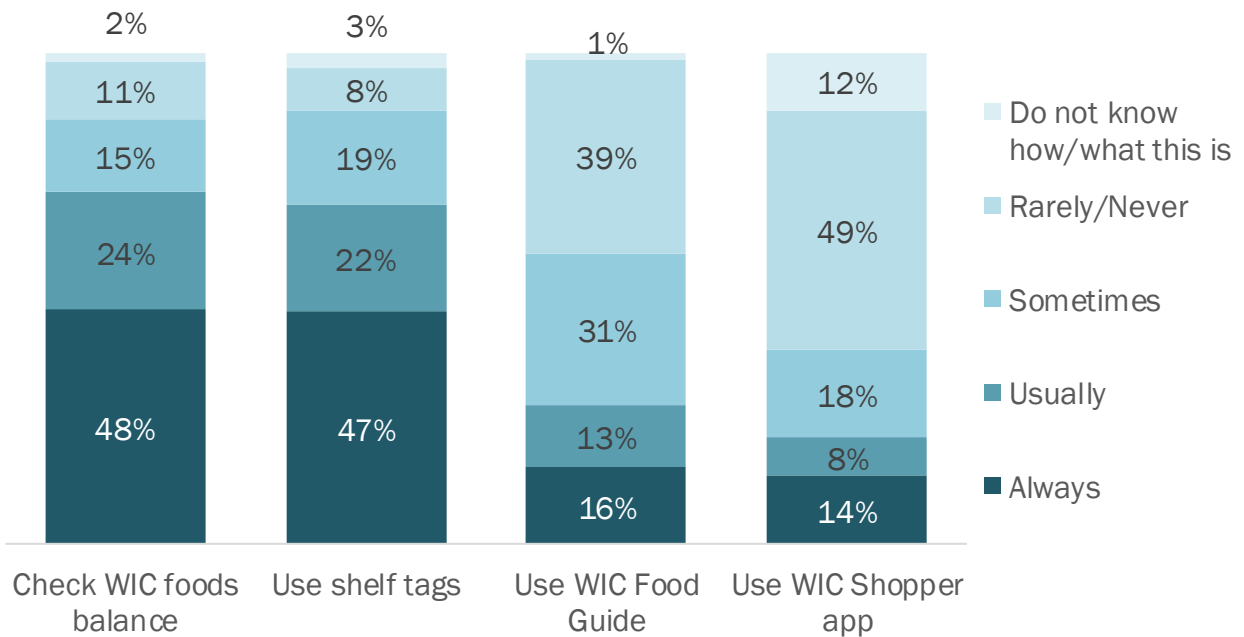
Because WIC shopping can be complicated at first, local WIC staff focus on this topic in depth at the initial enrollment appointment. The chart below shows different activities clinic staff engage in with participants. Eighty-seven percent of respondents reported that they received a current WIC Foods Guide. The other activities listed 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-seven 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-two percent of respondents reported always or usually checking their current WIC foods balance. Relying on shelf tags was the next most used resource with 70% of respondents using them.

Resources Used in WIC Shopping

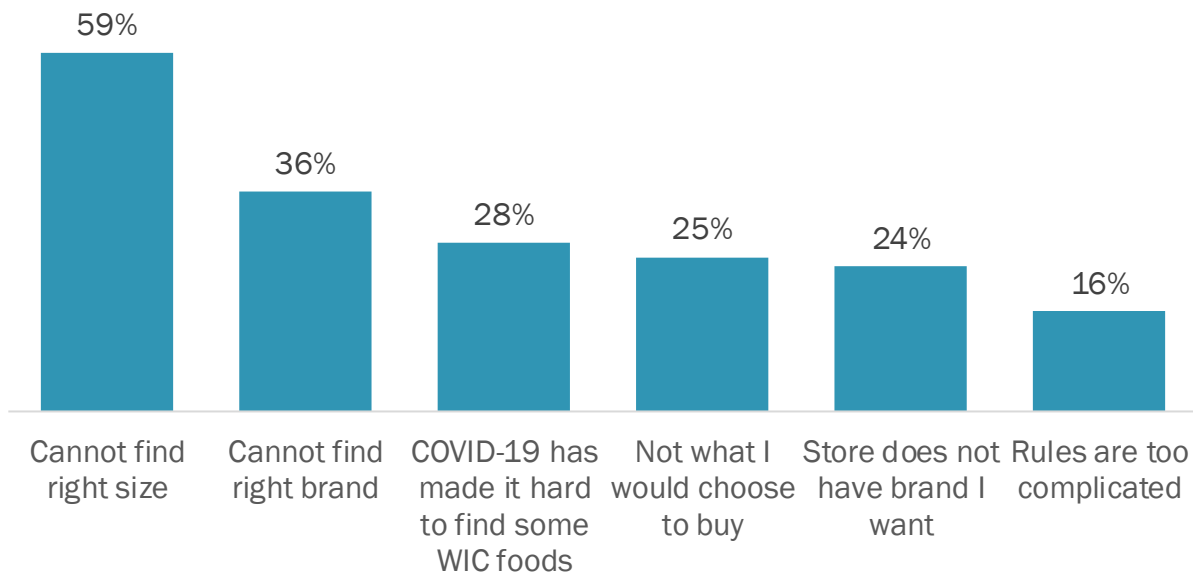


Among those who never used the WIC Shopper app, 23% reported not knowing about it, 15% didn't have cell service inside the store, 9% didn't use it because it is not connected to their WIC account, and 7% reported the app uses too much data.

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 (20%).

Just over three-quarters (78%) of survey respondents reported buying all of their foods with their WIC card. Forty 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 (59%) followed by not being able to find the correct brand (36%). Twenty-eight percent responded that COVID-19 has made it hard to find some WIC foods.

Challenges Finding WIC Foods



Similar to previous surveys, whole wheat bread, 48 oz. juice, yogurt, 64 oz. juice, and cold cereal were the top five most challenging WIC foods to find.

Top 5 Most Challenging to Find WIC Foods	
Whole Wheat Bread	27%
48 oz. Juice	23%
Yogurt	13%
64 oz. Juice	11%
Cold Cereal	10%

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.

Reasons why not all WIC foods are bought each month



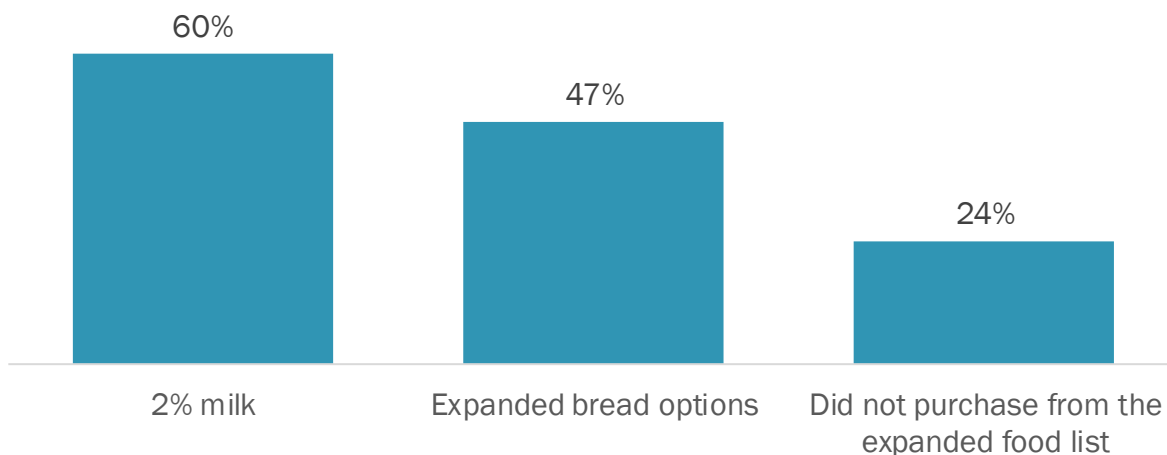
"There's too much juice, and in the summer we get eggs from our chickens."

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. Others mentioned a preference for online shopping.

Vermont WIC received federal waivers to allow for expanded food options during the COVID-19 public health emergency, namely 2% milk and expanded bread options. Nine out of ten (90%) of respondents reported having these expanded options made shopping somewhat or much easier, 9% were not sure. Too few respondents to report responded that the expanded food list did not make WIC shopping easier at all.

"I do most of my shopping online so I do not get to use all of my benefits. When I do get to the grocery store they don't always have all the WIC options."

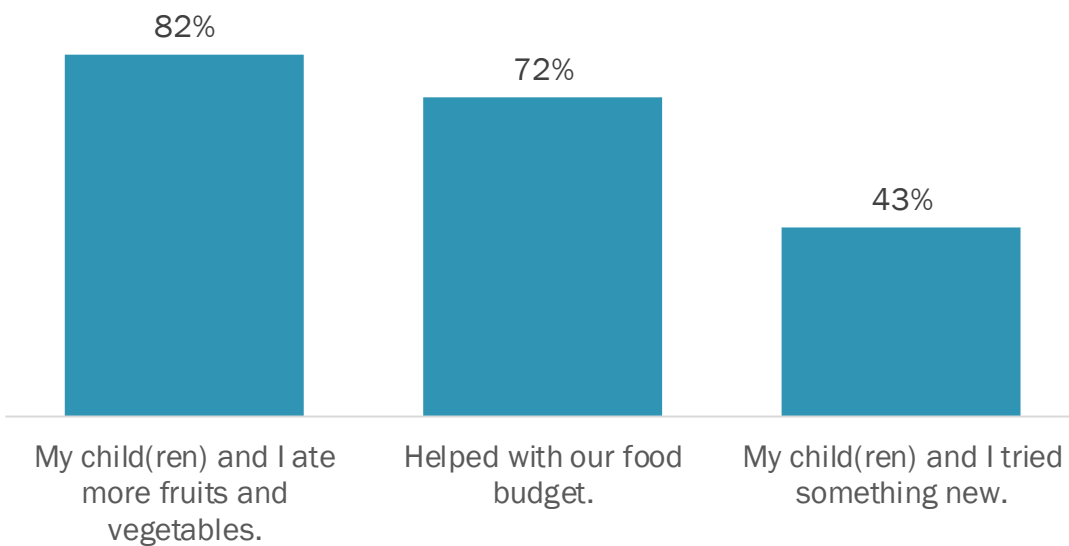
Which of the expanded foods did you purchase?



The American Rescue Plan Act allocated four months of funding to the WIC program (June through September 2021) to increase the amount of the fruit and vegetable benefit to \$35 per month for women and children over age 1. This increase was well-received by families, with 82% of respondents reported they and their children ate more fruits and vegetables, 72% reported it helped with their food budget, and 43% responded they and their children tried something new. A total of 17 respondents reported not using the increase fruit and vegetable benefit.

"It has been very helpful! Now every meal for everyday of the month I can offer fresh fruits and veggies to my kiddos. They have tried more and now eat more fruits and veggies. So much appreciated!"

How has the increase in fruit and vegetable money impacted your family?



Nutrition Education

A cornerstone of the WIC program is nutrition education. Families complete a nutrition activity twice per year in between clinic appointments. They can be done online at wichealth.org, or at in-person group or one-on-one activities. Completion of this nutrition activity is required for continued food benefit issuance. Beginning in mid-March 2020, Vermont WIC operated under a federal waiver allowing food benefits to be issued regardless of completion of nutrition education. Sixty-five percent of respondents have completed a WIC nutrition education activity.

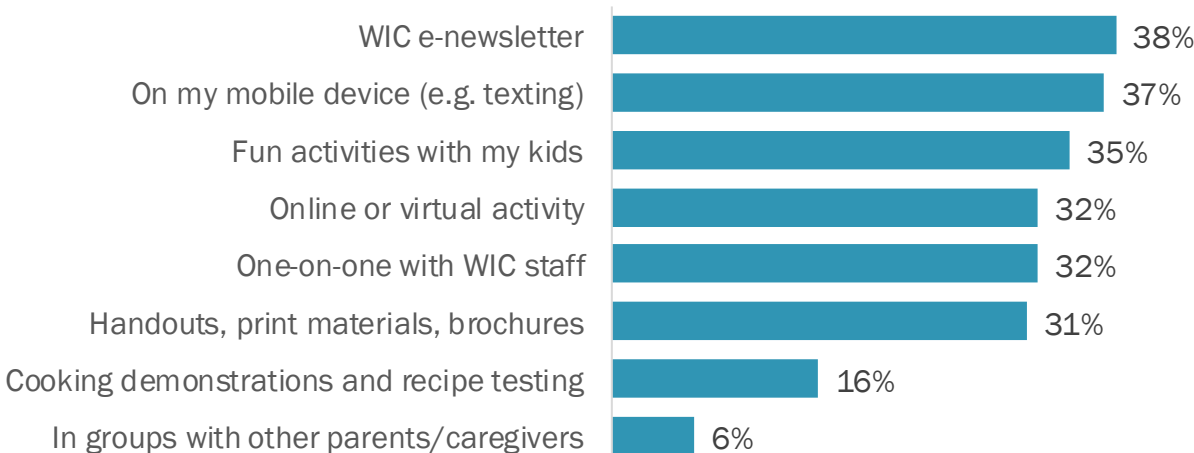
Participants are interested in a variety of nutrition education topics related to nutrition and other health behaviors. The most popular topic was “Child nutrition” was selected by half (50%) of respondents, followed by “Tips for stretching a household food budget” (41%) and “How to maintain a healthy weight or losing weight” (38%). The full list is summarized in the table below.

Nutrition & Health Topics	
Child nutrition	50%
Tips for stretching a family food budget	41%
How to maintain a healthy weight or losing weight	38%
How to cook with WIC foods	34%
Ways to choose more vegetables and fruits	28%
Physical activity and active play for kids and families	27%
Dental health	26%
Shopping for WIC/healthy foods	23%
Food safety	17%
Infant feeding	13%
Breastfeeding	12%
Healthy pregnancy	10%
Lead and other environmental health topics	10%
Immunizations	6%
Returning to work and breastfeeding/pumping	5%
Quitting smoking, alcohol, or other drugs	4%

When asked, “What health changes has WIC helped you make?” the top answers were eating more fruits and vegetables (67%), trying new foods (34%) and eating more whole grains (33%). Twenty percent of respondents reported that WIC has not helped make any of the health changes and that they already make healthy choices.

When asked, “What are your favorite ways to get your nutrition information from WIC?”, the WIC e-newsletter was the top answer, selected by 38% of respondents.

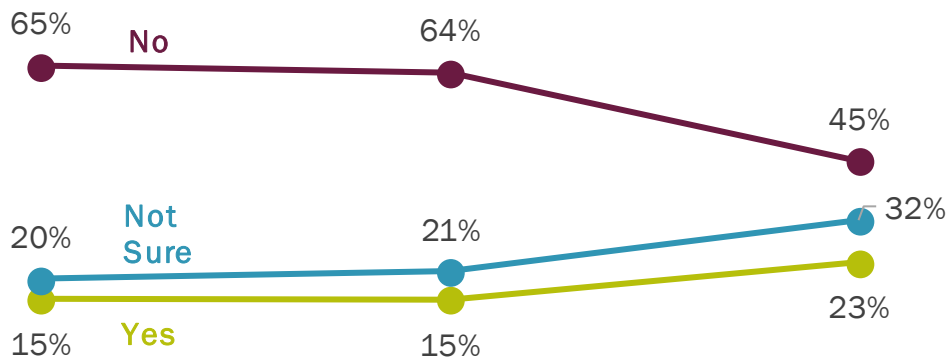
Favorite ways to get nutrition information from WIC



When asked more specifically which WIC nutrition activity they choose to do in between appointments, the majority chose WIChealth.org (60%), Vermont WIC’s online education platform.

Vermont WIC pivoted during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide online nutrition activities to limit in-person interactions. Therefore, questions were asked to better understand interest in and barriers to these options. Interest in live virtual/online nutrition or breastfeeding activities has seen an increase, as did the percent of respondents who are unsure. The question has been revised slightly to improve understanding; exact question language from each survey is noted in the chart below.

Interest in Live Virtual/Online Nutrition or Breastfeeding Activities



May 2020: Are you interested in live, online nutrition or breastfeeding classes from WIC?

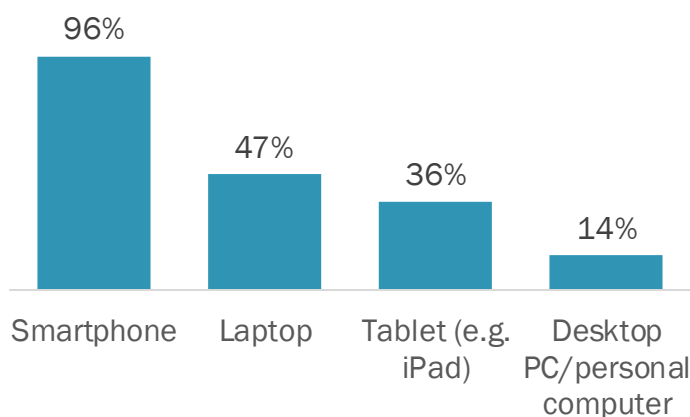
August 2020: Are you interested in live virtual/online group nutrition or breastfeeding activities from WIC?

August 2021: Are you interested in live virtual/online group activities from WIC?

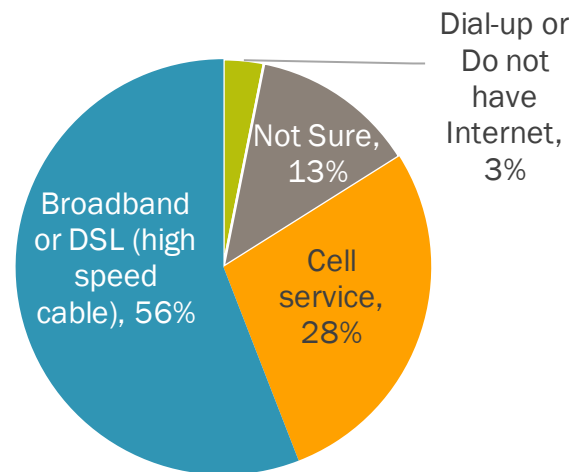
Technology Use

Questions regarding technology use and internet access were included in order to plan for future program improvements that use technology resources. Almost all (96%) of respondents use a smartphone and almost half (47%) use a laptop. About half (56%) access the Internet with Broadband or DSL and about a quarter (28%) use cell service.

Types of technology used at home



How Internet is accessed at home



Program Improvements

About 42% of survey respondents (290) answered the question, “If you could make one suggestion for the WIC Program, what would it be?”

Of those responses, 64 were encouragements to keep the program working as is or expressions of gratitude. 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).

Related to accessing the WIC food benefit, the next most common theme included suggestions for improving the shopping experience including online shopping, improvements at the store such as shelf tagging and identification of WIC foods, and linking current WIC benefits to the WIC Shopper App.

Finally, themes emerged to increase hands-on nutrition activities and allowing for the option of returning to in-person clinic appointments.