Federal food assistance program encourages healthy beverage purchases

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Efforts to encourage healthy beverage choices by people receiving federal food assistance are paying off, according to a study by the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity. The study shows that purchases of 100% juice declined among participants in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) after the program changed in 2007 to offer foods that better reflect dietary recommendations for Americans. The study is published in Pediatrics.

While 100% fruit juices are widely marketed as healthy beverages, they contain the same amount of calories as soda and lack the fiber that is present in whole fruit. In addition, previous research in Pediatrics has shown that excessive consumption of 100 percent juice is associated with increased risk of weight gain.The WIC program is designed to help meet the needs of pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and young children who are at nutritional risk. Prior to the WIC food package revisions, the federal monthly allowances of 100% juice exceeded dietary recommendations for juice consumption in young children. New WIC food packages provide considerably less juice.

The Yale researchers examined 100% juice and other beverage purchases made at a New England supermarket chain by households participating in WIC over a two-year period. The beverage type and amount were compared before and after the revisions.

Researchers found that juice purchases per household declined by 23.5% after revisions. The reductions in juice purchased with WIC funds were only partly compensated for by juice purchased with participants' personal funds. Researchers also noted that the WIC revisions did not cause an increase in purchases of cheaper and less nutritious beverage substitutes such as soda.

Due to WIC's broad reach and targeted impact on young, high-risk children, the authors say the program can help establish healthy eating habits and prevent obesity in low-income youth. They say the revision to WIC could significantly impact health outcomes related to excessive consumption of caloric beverages in underserved, vulnerable populations.

"Reducing juice and sugar consumption was one of the goals for revising the WIC food packages," says Tatiana Andreyeva, lead author and director of economic initiatives at the Rudd Center. "This study shows that the revisions were successful and necessary, given the high prevalence of obesity in very young children, particularly among low-income families."

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