

Illinois WIC Program Nutrition Practice Standards (NPS)
WIC Staff Breastfeeding Competencies
June 2025

Nutrition Practice Standards are provided to assist staff in translating policy into practice. This guidance is intended to be used in conjunction with the Illinois WIC Policy and Procedure manual to assist in ensuring effective, accurate, and health-promoting nutrition assistance is provided to Illinois WIC participants. Below are the competencies expected of WIC staff regarding breastfeeding promotion and support based on the USDA Breastfeeding Curriculum.

Staff Competencies

Promoting the WIC Philosophy for Achieving Breastfeeding Success

Each local agency is required to incorporate task-appropriate breastfeeding promotion and support training into orientation programs and annual agency in-services for all staff involved with WIC participants. Staff at all levels should be competent in basic breastfeeding knowledge, understand their role in supporting breastfeeding with families, and understand how to implement the WIC philosophy for achieving breastfeeding success.

Promote breastfeeding as the optimal method of infant feeding in the community, workplace, and healthcare system.

- Recognize their own beliefs and attitudes regarding breastfeeding and the impact of those beliefs and attitudes on WIC participant decisions.
- Self-identify as part of the WIC “Team” that promotes, protects, and supports the breastfeeding relationship.
- Acquire ongoing education to build knowledge and skills.
- Provide only evidence-based information.
- Understand how the WIC food packages for the breastfeeding dyad support breastfeeding.
- Understand the benefits of breastfeeding.
- Maintain knowledge of state, national, and international policies and legislation that promote, protect, and support breastfeeding.

Assume breastfeeding is the normal and expected method of infant feeding for all participants. Encourage pregnant participants to breastfeed.

- Recognize and respect the individual components of each breastfeeding dyad including physical, cultural, behavioral, and social factors.
- Acknowledge concerns about ability to breastfeed.
- Encourage all women to exclusively initiate breastfeeding and to continue breastfeeding for at least one year and as long thereafter as both mom and baby desire. Emphasize the value of continuing to breastfeed after returning to work or school.
- Use breastfeeding-friendly questions in all initial contacts, e.g.: How is breastfeeding going? How can I help you with breastfeeding?
- Refer participants to higher levels of care as appropriate



Yield to Breastfeeding Peer Counselor (BFPC), Competent Professional Authority Assistant (CPAA), Competent Professional Authority (CPA) or Designated Breastfeeding Expert (DBE). If you have not completed Level 2 in the USDA Breastfeeding curriculum, your breastfeeding scope of practice ends here.

Use culturally appropriate breastfeeding education and support strategies to help participants prevent and manage common challenges that can sometimes arise. Assess participant’s intent to exclusively, partially, or minimally breastfeed and understand the participant’s plans and goals for breastfeeding.

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Provide anticipatory guidance to participants on:

- Getting off to a good start with breastfeeding in the first weeks
- Preventing and managing common challenges
- How to recognize breastfeeding is not going well
- Infant behaviors and needs
- Normal lactation experiences and optimal breastfeeding practices that help participants initiate and maintain breastfeeding
- How to prepare parents and infants for separation
- Improving or involving family support for breastfeeding plans

Counsel participants using effective listening and communication skills on:

- Common latch concerns
- Improving self-confidence in breastfeeding, especially those with perceived low milk supply
- Problem solving common barriers and concerns
- Hand expression of breastmilk, including when to use it and its benefits
- Safely and effectively use a breast pump
- Safe handling and storage of breastmilk

Assist in infant feeding classes and peer support groups

Issuing Breast Pumps

Any staff issuing a breast pump is responsible for:

- Assessing the needs for breast pump use and assist the family in choosing the correct type of pump based on their goals and individual feeding situation.
 - Understand that breast pumps are needed in certain circumstances, but not all participants require a pump to successfully breastfeed
- Being educated about the availability of and general requirements for distributing breast pumps, including pumps available through Medicaid reimbursement for eligible participants.
- Providing the correct type of pump to a participant, either a loaned pump (only electric multi-user pumps should be loaned to participants), or a given pump (all other types of pumps).
- Follow up within 24 hours is recommended to assure pump is operating correctly and the participant is using it properly.



Yield to CPA and DBE. If you have not completed Level 3 in the USDA Breastfeeding Curriculum, your breastfeeding scope of practice ends here.

Assess lactation history and potential challenges for prenatal participants. Identify factors that can impact breastfeeding, including physiological and social factors. Understand:

- How certain maternal metabolic disorders that can impact breastfeeding success
- The mechanisms underlying the benefits of breastfeeding for the participant, infant, and society
- The importance of exclusive breastfeeding for the health of the parent and infant, and the consequences of giving artificial nipples or pacifiers and supplemental formula on milk supply, the long-term outcomes and possible detrimental effects of early formula supplementation e.g., potential for future chronic disease
- The barriers families face to breastfeeding
- The maternal and infant nutritional needs during the first year postpartum
- How current Illinois WIC Breastfeeding food packages can support a participant's breastfeeding goals

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Use VENA to identify and address individual needs and concerns about breastfeeding. Use evidence-based and up-to-date information about breastfeeding technique and management to encourage and support breastfeeding families.

- Understand how infants with GI/nutritional issues can impact breastfeeding success.
- Assess for delayed onset of lactogenesis.
- Determining real vs perceived low milk supply through milk transfer observation.
- How to navigate issues with returning to work or school, including creating a basic plan for expressing milk and tips for talking with childcare providers.
- Develop a basic care plan with participants setting SMART and practical breastfeeding goals.



Yield to the DBE. If you have not completed Level 4 in the USDA Breastfeeding Curriculum, your breastfeeding scope of practice ends here.

Conduct a full assessment of the dyad, including physical characteristics and feeding techniques. Develop individualized care plans in the prenatal, early postpartum, and later postpartum periods as needed.

- Assess health conditions in pregnancy that can impact breastfeeding.
- Assess for effective milk transfer through observation and weighted feeds.
- Provide follow-up breastfeeding support to participants as needed or referred from other WIC staff.

Assess and counsel families with complex breastfeeding situations, including but not limited to:

- Infants who have neurological, physical, or other conditions that impact breastfeeding
- Abrupt suppression of lactation/weaning due to contraindications to lactation or participant desire
- Guiding participants in reestablishing or increasing milk supply after weaning
- The use of breastfeeding aids and alternative feeding devices
- The use of a breast pump to assist in managing complex breastfeeding issues

Collaborate with community and healthcare teams for families to maintain and improve continuity of care.

Counsel participants and collaborate with healthcare professionals regarding medications and other substances that can impact breastfeeding.



Yield to IBCLC and other Healthcare Professionals. Refer family to their healthcare providers for situations beyond the scope of the USDA Breastfeeding Curriculum or IBCLC Scope of Practice.