

903 Foster Care

Definition/Cut-off Value

Entering the foster care system during the previous six months or moving from one foster care home to another foster care home during the previous six months.

Participant Category and Priority Level

Category	Priority
Pregnant Women	IV or VII
Breastfeeding Women	IV or VII
Non-Breastfeeding Women	VI or VII
Infants	IV or VII
Children	V or VII

Justification

"Foster children are among the most vulnerable individuals in the welfare system. As a group, they are sicker than homeless children and children living in the poorest sections of inner cities." This statement from a 1995 Government Accounting Office report on the health status of foster children confirms research findings that foster children have a high frequency of mental and physical problems, often the result of abuse and neglect suffered prior to entry into the foster care system. When compared to other Medicaid-eligible children, foster care children have higher rates of chronic conditions such as asthma, diabetes and seizure disorders. They are also more likely than children in the general population to have birth defects, inadequate nutrition and growth retardation including short stature.

Studies focusing on the health of foster children often point out the inadequacy of the foster care system in evaluating the health status and providing follow-up care for the children for whom the system is responsible. Because foster care children are wards of a system which lacks a comprehensive health component, the social and medical histories of foster children in transition, either entering the system or moving from one foster care home to another, are frequently unknown to the adults applying for WIC benefits for the children. For example, the adult accompanying a foster child to a WIC clinic for a first-time certification may have no knowledge of the child's eating patterns, special dietary needs, chronic illnesses or other factors which would qualify the child for WIC. Without any anthropometric history, failure to grow, often a problem for foster children, may not be diagnosed even by a single low cutoff percentile.

Since a high proportion of foster care children have suffered from neglect, abuse or abandonment and the health problems associated with these, entry into foster care or moving from one foster care home to another during the previous six months is a nutritional risk for certification in the WIC Program. Certifiers using this risk should be diligent in evaluating and documenting the health and nutritional status of the foster child to identify other risks as well as problems that may require follow-up or referral to other health care programs. This nutritional risk cannot be used for consecutive certifications while the child remains in the same foster home. It should be used as the sole risk criterion only if careful assessment of the

applicant's nutritional status indicates that no other risks based on anthropometric, medical or nutritional risk criteria can be identified.

The nutrition education, referrals and service coordination provided by WIC will support the foster parent in developing the skills and knowledge to ensure that the foster child receives appropriate nutrition and health care. Since a foster parent frequently has inadequate information about a new foster child's health needs, the WIC nutritionist can alert the foster parent to the nutritional risks that many foster care children have and suggest ways to improve the child's nutritional status.

References

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