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FAQ ON SNAP

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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For more information, visit unicefusa.org and to learn about research partnerships, contact Anne Day Leong (aleong@unicefusa.org).

What is the SNAP Program?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, is a federal food assistance program administered by the USDA and delivered through state agencies. It provides low-income individuals and families with an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card to pay for monthly food expenses.[1]

Who is eligible for the SNAP program?

There are two SNAP eligibility pathways. The first is the traditional pathway, in which SNAP participants provide documentation showing that their household income and assets fall below a threshold set by federal law. The second is known as categorical eligibility, in which participants are enrolled in SNAP based on their participation in other social safety net programs (e.g., the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF] program). Both eligibility pathways have work requirements, determined by each state.[2,3]

How many people are served each year by SNAP, and how many of them are children?

In fiscal year 2024, SNAP served an average of 41.7 million participants per month, which is approximately 12.3% of the U.S. population. In FY 2023, about 39% of SNAP participants were children.[4,5]

How do people sign up for SNAP?

Applicants can apply through their state or local SNAP office, typically online, by mail, or in person. Applicants undergo an eligibility interview (over the phone or in-person) and submit documentation such as proof of identity, income, and residency. Applications must be processed within 30 days, unless expedited.[2,6,7]

How do people use SNAP benefits?

SNAP benefits are loaded onto an EBT card, which functions like a debit card that can be used at authorized retailers (e.g., grocery stores, supermarkets, convenience stores, farmers' markets, and some online vendors). Purchases draw directly from the account balance.[1,2]

What can SNAP benefits buy?

SNAP benefits can be used to pay for unprepared food items such as fruits, vegetables, breads, cereals, milk, cheese, meats, poultry, fish, snack foods, and nonalcoholic beverages such a juice. SNAP benefits cannot be used to pay for items such as alcohol, tobacco products, nonfood items (hygiene products, paper goods, pet food), hot prepared foods (ready-to-eat), vitamins, or medicines.[8]

What is the average wait time to sign up for benefits?

Eligible households must receive SNAP benefits within 30 days of their application. Those in urgent need who meet state and federal criteria can request expediting processing and should receive benefits within 7 days.[9,10] In practice, many families and individuals will wait much longer than anticipated processing times to receive benefits. In some locations, families have waited several months due to backlogs at their local SNAP offices.[11]

How much money do people get from their SNAP benefits per month?

In FY 2024, the average monthly benefit per participant was approximately $187.20, or about $6.15 per day.[4]

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