

# 4-1 Nutrition Risks and Risk Levels

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## What is a “nutrition risk”?

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WIC is a government-based nutrition program that helps low-income households, similar to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). WIC is different than SNAP and other food assistance programs. Income eligibility is not the only reason participants qualify for WIC. WIC participants must also have a nutrition need or risk to qualify for WIC services. A **nutrition risk** is a health problem, medical condition, diet deficiency or other issue that can affect the health of a participant.

Once we know what risks a participant has, WIC uses nutritious food and nutrition education to improve the participant’s health and growth. **Nutrition risk factors** are key to personalizing WIC services.

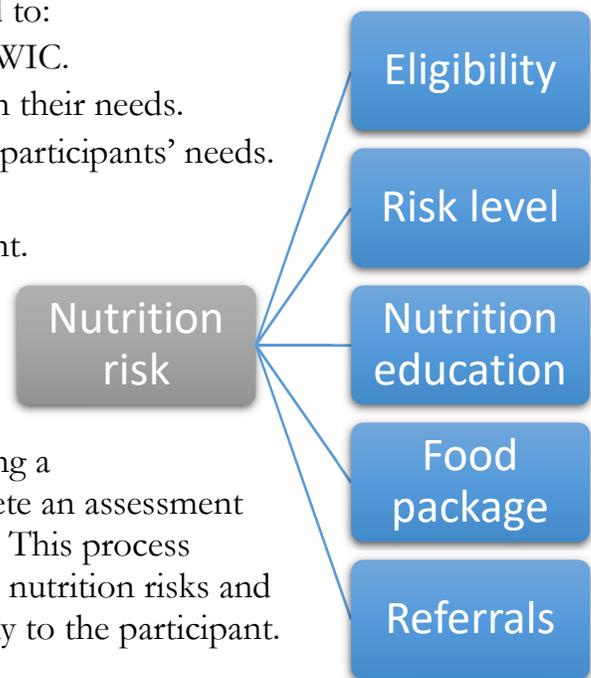
In the WIC clinic, nutrition risk factors are used to:

- Certify that the participant is eligible for WIC.
- Focus participants’ nutrition education on their needs.
- Identify which WIC foods best meet the participants’ needs.
- Determine the participants’ risk level.
- Identify referrals needed by the participant.

## Risk assignment

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Only a certifier can assign a nutrition risk. During a certification appointment, a certifier will complete an assessment to determine if a participant has a nutrition risk. This process requires the certifier to understand the different nutrition risks and to be able to figure out if any of these risks apply to the participant.



## What are the nutrition risks? Think **ABCDE**

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Nutrition risks are sometimes referred to as risk criteria because each one can only be assigned if the participant meets certain criteria or conditions. The nutrition risk criteria are standardized throughout the United States. The risk criteria are reviewed and recommended by a national group of health professionals. The federal WIC office at the USDA requires state WIC programs to use these standardized risks. Every risk is given a number, and the numbers are mostly grouped together with similar risks.

There are over 100 different nutrition risks that can be classified into 5 groups:

- **A** = Anthropometrics
- **B** = Biochemical
- **C** = Clinical
- **D** = Dietary
- **E** = Environmental

Risk Group	Description	Risks related to:
<b>A</b> nthropometric 100's	Based on measurements of a person's physical size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Height</li><li>• Weight</li><li>• Head circumference</li><li>• Rate of growth or prenatal weight gain</li></ul>
<b>B</b> iochemical 200's	Based on blood tests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Anemia</li><li>• Blood lead level</li></ul>
<b>C</b> linical 300's	Based on a health history and current health status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Chronic illnesses</li><li>• Birth problems</li><li>• Genetic conditions</li></ul>
<b>D</b> ietary 400's	Based on feeding behaviors and daily intake of the participant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inappropriate nutrition practices</li></ul>
<b>E</b> nvironmental 500's, 600's, 700's, 800's, 900's	Based on social and safety factors that influence nutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Smoking</li><li>• Substance use</li><li>• Foster care</li><li>• Domestic violence</li></ul>

## Learning activity

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For each example, write which risk group the criteria might describe.



Nutrition Risk criteria	Risk Group
A 3-year old child gets a bottle of Kool-Aid to sleep with	
A woman has been diagnosed with gestational diabetes	
An infant's weight is high for their length	
A mom reports smoking marijuana to reduce nausea	

## The Nutrition Risk training module

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The **Nutrition Risk** training module includes risk information sheets for every risk. We call these sheets, “risk info sheets”. The risk info sheet explains each risk in detail and includes the criteria for when it should be assigned. The **Nutrition Risk** module is divided into chapters by participant category, with the nutrition risks specific to each category of WIC participant. You must complete the Nutrition Risk module chapter for a category before you can complete an assessment and certify that category of participant. For example, your training supervisor may decide that you will start with certifying only pregnant women, so you’ll complete Chapters 3 and 4 in the Nutrition Risk Module before you certify women.

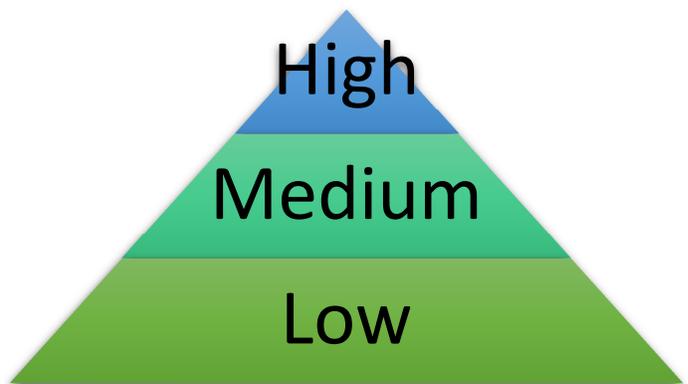
## What is risk level?

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Every nutrition risk is assigned a risk level. The risk levels indicate the seriousness of the risk and how likely it is to impact the participant’s long-term nutrition status.

Nutrition risk levels can be:

- High
- Medium, or
- Low



## How is risk level determined?

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The State WIC office determines which risk factors are high-risk, medium-risk or low-risk. Each risk factor has an assigned risk level in the data system. When you assign a risk factor to a participant, the data system automatically assigns the correct risk level. The participant's overall risk level will be the same as the highest risk level of the nutrition risk factors assigned during your assessment.



## Why is risk level important?

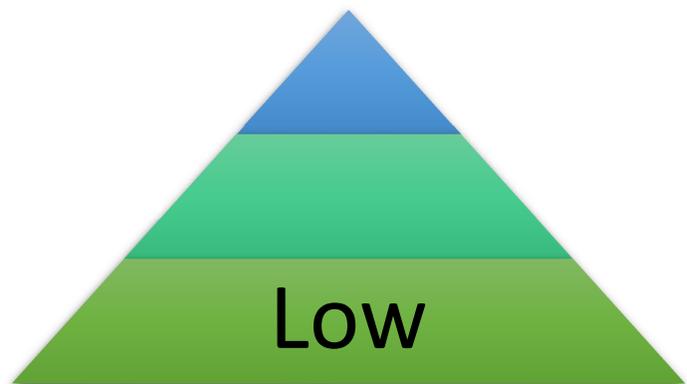
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The participant's risk level determines who provides follow-up and counseling ([See Lesson 2-1](#)).

Risk level:	Description	Follow-up provided by:
High	Serious health conditions that can have significant impact on long term health	WIC nutritionist must provide the follow-up
Medium	Moderate health conditions	Any trained certifier
Low	Minor or normal health conditions	Any trained certifier

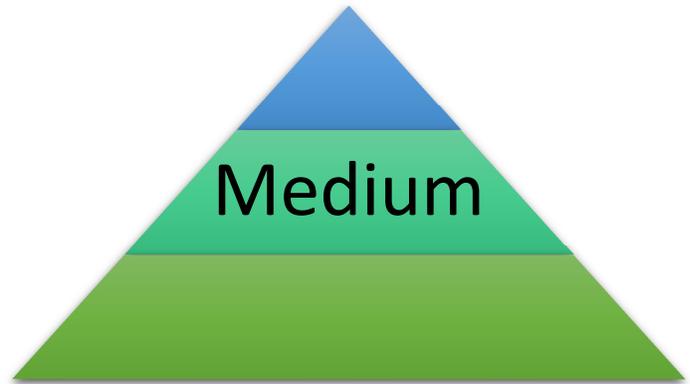
### A low-risk participant:

- Is counseled by any certifier at the certification appointment.
- Chooses whichever type of quarterly nutrition-education works for them.
- The certifier has the option to refer low participants to the WIC nutritionist if there are concerns, such as multiple risks.



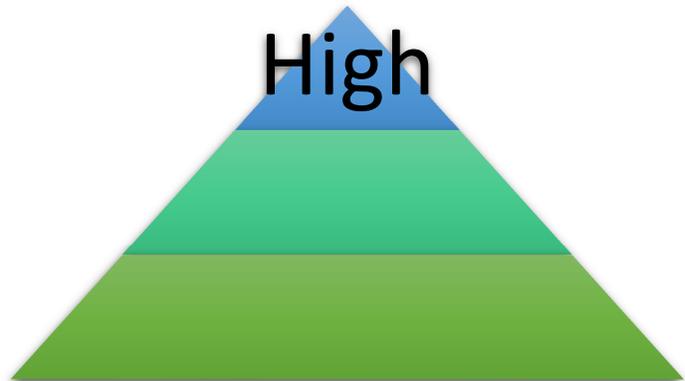
### A medium-risk participant:

- Is counseled by any certifier at the certification appointment.
- Chooses whichever type of quarterly nutrition-education works for them, including online classes or individual follow-up.
- The certifier is encouraged to consider whether referring medium risk participants to the WIC nutritionist would be beneficial for the participant, especially if there are multiple concerns or limited follow-up with their health care provider.
- The certifier should document what they have learned about the participants health condition in progress notes. This helps the next WIC staff person to see the participant make sure the participant gets appropriate care and follow-up.



### A high-risk participant:

- Requires more intensive nutrition counseling.
- Once identified as high-risk, is required to be referred to and monitored by the WIC nutritionist.
- Will be seen by the WIC nutritionist individually.
- Will have a high-risk care plan that describes what type of follow-up that the WIC nutritionist recommends.
- **Note:** In cases when the WIC nutritionist cannot see the high-risk participant during their initial certification, the certifier should avoid providing specific diet recommendations that could interfere with the participant's health condition. The certifier can explore what the participant knows or as tried regarding their health condition. This information should be documented in progress notes. This will help the WIC nutritionist when they follow up with the participant.



## When can risk levels be changed?

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There is only one situation where a certifier would change the risk level assigned by the data system, otherwise the risk level should remain unchanged.

Risk 201 Low Hemoglobin / Hematocrit is assigned as a medium risk if the blood test values entered in the data system are below a certain level. You must change the risk level to high and refer to the WIC nutritionist if:

- The level is more than one point below normal; and,
- You rechecked the participant's blood and got the same reading.

See [Policy 661 – Competent Professional Authority: Appropriate Counseling for Risk Levels](#) for a complete list of medium and high risks.

## Learning activity

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What would you do?

1. A low-risk participant would like to complete an online class for her quarterly nutrition education.
2. A certifier, who is not a WIC nutritionist, is certifying a high-risk child whose caregiver asks about a special formula.
3. A certifier, who is not a WIC nutritionist, is certifying a pregnant woman with medium level risks who has a lot of questions about the medical diagnosis that the health care provider gave her.

## Talk it over

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Ask your training supervisor:

Who follows-up with high-risk participants in your agency?

Who follows-up with medium-risk participants in your agency?

## References

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[Policy 675 – Risk Criteria Codes and Descriptions](#) gives a complete list of each nutrition risk factor and the criteria for using the risk.