USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Frequently Asked Questions

1. **What is SNAP for?**
2. **Who is SNAP for?**
3. **Do I need to be a U.S. citizen to receive SNAP benefits?**
4. **How do I obtain SNAP benefits?**
5. **Can you send me an application form?**
6. **Can I apply on line?**
7. **How can I find out if I might be eligible for SNAP benefits?**
8. **How is each household's SNAP allotment determined?**
9. **What is the average benefit from SNAP?**
10. **What foods are eligible for purchase with SNAP benefits?**
11. **What measures are taken to prevent SNAP fraud?**
12. **What do I do if my EBT card is lost or stolen?**
13. **Can I use my EBT card in another State?**
14. **When will my SNAP benefits be available on my EBT card?**
15. **Can I use EBT for online SNAP purchases?**
16. **Can I have food delivered to my home?**
17. **Can I check the balance of my EBT account online?**
18. **I have paper coupons. Can I still use them to buy food?**
19. **Do I have to use all my SNAP benefits up in the month that I receive them, or will they be carried over into the next month?**
20. **What keeps unqualified people from getting SNAP benefits?**
21. **When did the program begin?**
22. **How do I report someone I think is violating SNAP rules?**
23. **What are some characteristics of SNAP households?**
24. **Don't some territories, such as Puerto Rico, use a different version of SNAP?**
25. **How many people get SNAP benefits, and at what cost?**
26. **Need more information?**
27. **Can't find the answer?**

1. What is SNAP for?

SNAP helps put food on the table for some 31 million people per month in FY 2009. It provides low-income households with **electronic benefits** they can use like cash at most grocery stores. SNAP is the cornerstone of the Federal food assistance programs, and provides crucial support to needy households and to those making the transition from welfare to work.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture administers SNAP at the Federal level through its Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). State agencies administer the program at State and local levels, including determination of eligibility and allotments, and distribution of benefits.

2. Who is SNAP for?

Households must meet eligibility requirements and provide information – and verification -- about their household circumstances. U.S. citizens and some aliens who are admitted for permanent residency may qualify. The welfare reform act of 1996 ended eligibility for many legal immigrants, though Congress later restored benefits to many children and elderly immigrants, as well as some specific groups. The welfare reform act also placed time limits on benefits for unemployed, able-bodied, childless adults.

21

Local SNAP offices can provide information about eligibility, and USDA operates a toll-free number (800-221-5689) for people to receive information about SNAP. Most states also have a **toll free information/hotline number.**

To participate in SNAP:

- Households may have no more than $2,000 in countable resources, such as a bank account ($3,000 if at least one person in the household is age 60 or older, or is disabled). Certain resources are not counted, such as a home and lot. Special rules are used to determine the resource value of vehicles owned by household members.

- The gross monthly income of most households must be 130 percent or less of the Federal poverty guidelines ($1,907 per month for a family of three in most places, effective Oct. 1, 2008 through Sept. 30, 2009). Gross income includes all cash payments to the household, with a few exceptions specified in the law or the program regulations.

- Net monthly income must be 100 percent or less of Federal poverty guidelines ($1,467 per month for a household of three in most places, effective Oct. 1, 2008 through Sept. 30, 2009). Net income is figured by adding all of a household's gross income, and then taking a number of approved deductions for child care, some shelter costs and other expenses. Households with an elderly or disabled member are subject only to the net income test.

- Most able-bodied adult applicants must meet certain work requirements.

- All household members must provide a Social Security number or apply for one.

Federal poverty guidelines are established by the Office of Management and Budget, and are updated annually by the Department of Health and Human Services.

3. Do I need to be a U.S. citizen to receive SNAP benefits?

Certain **non-citizens**, such as those admitted for humanitarian reasons, those admitted for permanent residence, many children, elderly immigrants and individuals who have been working in the United States for certain periods of time, are eligible for SNAP. Eligible household members can get SNAP benefits even if there are other members of the household who are not eligible.

4. How do I obtain SNAP benefits?

Go to the **local SNAP office** and fill out an application. You have the right to submit the application the same day. You can also call the office and ask them to send you an application, fill it in and send it in by mail, or in some cases, by fax. The local office will give you an appointment for an interview. One thing to keep in mind is that SNAP prorates the first month's benefits from the day the local office gets your application, so it's to your advantage to get the application to the office quickly, even if you haven't had time to fill it out completely. Just give the local office your name, address and signature, if you can't complete the form immediately.

5. Can you send me an application form?

No. We're sorry, but FNS headquarters cannot send application forms. The States are responsible for the development of their own application forms. We have a **national map** of state SNAP applications and local offices, as well as a **State Applications** page with links to each state's SNAP application. You can download an application form, or visit the **State Applications** and ask for one. If you download an application, you can print it out, fill it in at home and mail or take it to the local office. Some States allow you to fax the form to the local office.

6. Can I apply on line?

Currently, there are just a few States with working systems that allow applicants to apply for SNAP benefits by computer. To check to see if your State is one of them, go to **To Apply** under Applicants/Recipients.

7. How can I find out if I might be eligible for SNAP benefits?

21

Our **pre-screening tool** will tell you whether you might be eligible for SNAP benefits, and how much you might be eligible to receive, so you can see whether it would be worth your while to go to the local SNAP office and apply.

8. How is each household's SNAP allotment determined?

Eligible households are issued a monthly allotment of SNAP benefits based on the Thrifty Food Plan, a low-cost model diet plan. The TFP is based on National Academy of Sciences' Recommended Dietary Allowances, and on food choices of low-income households.

An individual household's SNAP allotment is equal to the maximum allotment for that household's size, less 30 percent of the household's net income. Households with no countable income receive the maximum allotment ($668 per month in Fiscal Year 2009 for a household of four people). Allotment levels are higher for Alaska, Hawaii, Guam, and the Virgin Islands, reflecting higher food prices in those areas.

9. What is the average benefit from SNAP?

The average monthly benefit was about $101 per person and about $227 per household in FY 2008.

10. What foods are eligible for purchase with SNAP benefits?

Households **CAN** use SNAP benefits to buy:

- Foods for the household to eat, such as:
  - -- breads and cereals
  - -- fruits and vegetables
  - -- meats, fish and poultry; and
  - -- dairy products
- Seeds and plants which produce food for the household to eat.

Households **CANNOT** use SNAP benefits to buy:

- Beer, wine, liquor, cigarettes or tobacco
- Any nonfood items, such as:
  - -- pet foods;
  - -- soaps, paper products; and
  - -- household supplies.
- Vitamins and medicines.
- Food that will be eaten in the store.
- Hot foods

Listing of Eligible Food Items

Please note that the posted listed does not cover all products currently on the market. As new designations are requested and made, FNS will update the posted list.

- **How FNS Determines Food Eligibility**
- **Eligible Food Items List** (excel)
- **Eligible Food Items List** (pdf)

In some areas, restaurants can be authorized to accept SNAP benefits from qualified homeless, elderly, or disabled people in exchange for low-cost meals. SNAP benefits cannot be exchanged for cash.

11. What measures are taken to prevent SNAP fraud?

USDA is committed to integrity in all of its nutrition assistance programs, and has put special emphasis on SNAP because of its size and importance. However, in a program as large as the SNAP, it may be inevitable that some people will try to cheat the system.

The Department has already taken a number of steps to make it easier to catch and punish people who misuse SNAP benefits. The welfare reform act of 1996 included several provisions, originally proposed by USDA, to more closely scrutinize food retailers who apply for SNAP authorization, and to more closely monitor retailers once they are participating in the program. Retailers who violate program rules can face heavy fines, removal from the program, or jail. Individual SNAP recipients

who sell their benefits can also be removed from the program.

One of the most promising developments in the fight against SNAP fraud has been the increasing use of electronic benefit transfer--EBT--to issue SNAP benefits. EBT uses a plastic card similar to a bank debit card to transfer funds from a SNAP benefits account to a retailer's account. With an EBT card, SNAP customers pay for groceries without any paper coupons changing hands. EBT eliminates paper coupons and creates an electronic record for each transaction that makes fraud easier to detect.

Most States have now adopted EBT for SNAP issuance, and in some cases for other programs such as USDA's Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, the Federal block-grant program operated by the Department of Health and Human Services to provide cash assistance to needy families.

12. What do I do if my EBT card is lost or stolen?

If your EBT card is lost or stolen, you should report it IMMEDIATELY by calling your **State's toll-free customer service number**. A new card will be reissued to you within 2-5 days.

13. Can I use my electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card in another state?

Yes, all EBT cards can be used in all States.

14. When will my SNAP benefits be available on my EBT card?

If you have just been certified to receive SNAP benefits, your benefits should be in your EBT account within 30 days from the date you filed your application. If you qualified for expedited benefits because your income was very low, your benefits should be in the account within 7 days from the date you filed the application. You will need to contact your caseworker to find out the exact day your benefits will be available.

Once you are certified and have received your first allotment, SNAP benefits will be made available to you on a monthly basis. You can learn when your monthly SNAP benefits become available at **SNAP Monthly Benefit Issuance Schedule**. Your state may also provide this information through its **toll-free customer service number.**

15. Can I use EBT for online SNAP purchases?

No. There are technical reasons why SNAP EBT cards cannot be accepted online at this time. EBT cards work like debit cards and the Personal Identification number (PIN) is the equivalent of an electronic signature; it guarantees that the person using the card is authorized to use it. Therefore, the PIN must be kept secret. When the PIN is entered online as part of a debit transaction, it is possible for others to read the PIN and use it to steal benefits. For this reason, online services are not currently willing to accept PIN-based transactions. The Internet is always evolving. In the future, there may be sufficient safeguards to allow secure PIN entry online, but that's not true today.

16. Can I have food delivered to my home?

Some stores have delivery capabilities. SNAP clients will need to contact the individual store to see if they will deliver and whether they have a means for collecting SNAP EBT benefits when the delivery is made. Stores may use a manual voucher system. A manual voucher can be completed and approved at the store, and then signed by the SNAP client when the food is delivered. Some retailers may also have wireless terminals which they can bring with them to the client's home delivery site.

17. Can I check the balance of my EBT SNAP account online?

At this time, the following **States** have online access to individual EBT account information, such as balance and transaction history information. You will need your EBT card number and PIN to access your account information online.

18. I have paper coupons. Can I still use them to buy food?

21

At this time, authorized SNAP retailers are required to accept your paper coupons. If you have difficulty finding a store that will accept your coupons, please contact your caseworker who will be able to direct you to a store in your area that knows how to handle the coupons.

Paper coupons may no longer be redeemed at stores after June 17, 2009. Therefore, we encourage recipients to use any remaining paper coupons they may have now.

19. Do I have to use all my SNAP benefits up in the month that I receive them, or will they be carried over into the next month?

Any benefits that you have remaining in your SNAP EBT account at the end of the month WILL be carried over into the next month. However, if you have not used your EBT card at all for one year, the State will permanently remove your SNAP benefits from your EBT account.

20. What keeps unqualified people from getting SNAP benefits?

As part of the commitment to program integrity, USDA works closely with the States to ensure that they issue their benefits correctly. State workers carefully evaluate each application to determine eligibility and the appropriate level of benefits. USDA monitors the accuracy of eligibility and benefit determinations. States that fail to meet standards for issuing their SNAP benefits correctly can be sanctioned by USDA, and those that exceed the standard for payment accuracy can be eligible for additional funding support. People who receive SNAP benefits in error must repay any benefits for which they did not qualify.

21. When did the program begin?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly the Food Stamp Program) traces its earliest origins back to the Food Stamp Plan, which began in 1939 to help needy families in the Depression era. The modern program began as a pilot project in 1961 and was authorized as a permanent program in 1964. Expansion of the program occurred most dramatically after 1974, when Congress required all States to offer food stamps to low-income households. The Food Stamp Act of 1977 made significant changes in program regulations, tightening eligibility requirements and administration, and removing the requirement that food stamps be purchased by participants.

22. How do I report someone I think is violating SNAP rules?

Although SNAP is a Federal assistance program, it is the States that administer it, including the investigation and prosecution of violations of the SNAP rules. Most States maintain a fraud hotline number for the public to call to report suspected violations. The following link provides the number to call for your State to report your information.
http://www.fns.usda.gov/contact_info/hotlines.htm

23. What are some characteristics of SNAP households?

Based on a study of data gathered in Fiscal Year 2006:

- 49 percent of all participants are children (18 or younger), and 61 percent of them live in single-parent households.
- 52 percent of SNAP households include children.
- 9 percent of all participants are elderly (age 60 or over).
- 76 percent of all benefits go to households with children, 16 percent go to households with disabled persons, and 9 percent go to households with elderly persons.
- *33 percent of households with children were headed by a single parent, the overwhelming* majority of which were headed by women.
- The average household size is 2.3 persons.
- The average gross monthly income per SNAP household is $673.
- 43 percent of participants are white; 33 percent are African-American, non-Hispanic; 19 percent are Hispanic; 2 percent are Asian, 2 percent are Native American, and less than 1 percent are of unknown race or ethnicity.

21

24. Don't some territories, such as Puerto Rico, use a different version of SNAP?

In Puerto Rico, the Food Stamp Program was replaced in 1982 by a block grant program, called the Nutrition Assistance Program. The Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands and American Samoa in the Pacific also operate under block grants. The territories now provide cash or coupons to participants, rather than food stamps or food distribution. The grant can also be used for administrative expenses related to food production and distribution.

The cost for the block grant program in Puerto Rico is $1.739 billion for FY 2008. For the Northern Marianas and American Samoa the block grant programs in FY 2008 cost $15.9 million.

25. How many people get SNAP benefits, and at what cost?

In 2008, SNAP served 28.4 million people a month at an annual cost of $34.6 billion. In February 2009, SNAP served 32.6 million people, an all-time record. SNAP participation fluctuates with the economy and with the pattern of poverty in America. As the number of persons in poverty rose, SNAP participation grows. When poverty falls, so does reliance on SNAP. Participation for the latest available month can be found on **Program Data**.

Below shows how participation and benefit costs have changed in 5-year intervals over the history of the program:

- In 2005, it served 25.7 million people a month and cost $28.6 billion
- In 2000, it served 17.2 million people a month and cost $17.1 billion
- In 1995, it served 26.6 million people a month and cost $24.6 billion
- In 1990, it served 20.1 million people a month and cost $15.5 billion
- in 1985, it served 19.9 million people a month and cost $11.7 billion
- In 1980, it served 21.1 million people a month and cost $9.2 billion
- In 1975, it served 17.1 million people a month and cost $4.6 billion
- In 1970, it served 4.3 million people a month and cost $577 million.

The following chart lists the current gross and net income eligibility standards for the continental United States, Guam and the Virgin Islands. Eligibility levels are slightly higher for Alaska and Hawaii.

(Oct. 1, 2008 through Sept. 30, 2009)

Household size	Gross monthly income (130 percent of poverty)	Net monthly income (100 percent of poverty)
1	1,127	$ 867
2	1,517	1,167
3	1,907	1,467
4	2,297	1,767
5	2,687	2,067
6	3,077	2,367
7	3,467	2,667
8	3,857	2,967
Each additional member	+ 390	+ 300

The current maximum allotment levels for the continental United States:

21

(Apr. 1, 2009 through Sept. 30, 2009)

People in Household	Maximum Monthly Allotment
1	$ 200
2	$ 367
3	$ 526
4	$ 668
5	$ 793
6	$ 952
7	$ 1,052
8	$ 1,202
Each additional person...	$ 150

26. Need more information?

Local SNAP offices can provide information about eligibility, and USDA operates a toll-free number (800-221-5689) for people to receive information about SNAP benefits. For more information about SNAP or any of the Food and Nutrition Service's 15 nutrition assistance programs, contact the Food and Nutrition Service Communications Staff at 703-305-2286, or by mail at 3101 Park Center Drive, Alexandria, Virginia 22302. You can also e-mail us at **SNAPHQ-WEB@fns.usda.gov**.

27. Can't find the answer?

If you have questions that are not answered here or elsewhere on our web site, e-mail us at **SNAPHQ-WEB@fns.usda.gov**. *If you are interested in contacting us on technical questions about this site, please send an e-mail to* **webmaster@fns.usda.gov**.

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