

HOW TO APPLY  
FOR AND USE

# BASIC FOOD BENEFITS



*Washington State*  
Department of Social  
& Health Services

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This guide contains information about Basic Food and answers questions about how to apply for and use Basic Food benefits.

Basic Food helps low income people buy groceries and provide a nutritious diet for their families.

Basic Food benefits are intended to be part of a family's total food budget. Most households must spend some of their own money along with their food benefits in order to buy enough food for a month.

Basic Food benefits are based on family size and total family income. Some expenses are also considered including:

- Rent and utilities
- Childcare costs while at work, or looking for work
- Child support for children outside the home
- Medical costs paid by elderly or disabled people

You can use our benefit estimator to learn if you qualify for Basic Food and get an estimate of how much you would receive. You can find the estimator at [www.foodhelp.wa.gov](http://www.foodhelp.wa.gov) on the Basic Food tab.



## **When you get Basic Food you qualify for other benefits too:**

- Your children will be enrolled in the free school meals program;
- You can get low-cost local phone service; and
- You meet the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) income test.

If you would like more information or have specific questions about your situation, call 1-877-501-2233 or visit our website at [www.foodhelp.wa.gov](http://www.foodhelp.wa.gov)

## **Who can get Basic Food?**

**To receive Basic Food you must:**

- Live in Washington State
- Have income below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level
- Meet citizenship or alien status requirements

**You must not be:**

- A fugitive felon
- An undocumented alien

There may be other requirements based on your family's situation.

## **How do I apply for Basic Food?**

**There are three ways to apply for Basic Food assistance:**

- Online at [www.washingtonconnection.org](http://www.washingtonconnection.org)
- In person at the local DSHS Community Service Office, or
- By mail:  
DSHS Customer Service Center  
PO Box 11699  
Tacoma, WA 98411-6699

You can request to have a paper application sent to you by calling 1-877-501-2233.

Complete and turn in your application as soon as you can. If you qualify, your benefits start from the date you turn in your application. We will process your request within 30 days.

If you have little or no money and need help right away, you may qualify for expedited service. This means we will interview you and, if eligible, issue your food benefits within seven days.

## **What happens after I turn in my application?**

Once we receive your application, you will have an interview to ensure we understand the information on the application. Interviews are held over the phone or at your local DSHS Community Services Office. You will either receive a phone call, or an appointment letter giving you more information about the date and time for your interview.

### **During the interview, we will:**

- Explain program rules;
- Ask you questions about the information on your application;
- Ask you for proof of certain information;
- Give you a copy of your rights and responsibilities;
- Explain the purpose, appropriate use, and penalties of misuse of the food assistance program;
- Explain anything you don't understand.



If you need help with the interview process, someone who knows your circumstances can apply and be interviewed on your behalf. This person is called an authorized representative.

## **What should I bring to the interview?**

**You must provide proof of:**

- Your identity;
- Family income;
- Immigration status of any non-citizen household members, including sponsor's income and resource information if applicable.

**We may also ask you to provide proof of any unclear information.**

After the interview, we will give you a letter listing any proof we still need. We will help you get proof of the things we need during your interview. You will have at least ten days to provide the proof.

## **What happens if something changes in my household circumstances?**

If your household only receives Basic Food from our department, you need to tell us if your total gross household income goes above 200% of the federal poverty guidelines.

You can tell us of the change in writing, by telephone, in person, or online at [www.washingtonconnection.org](http://www.washingtonconnection.org). You must report the change by the 10th of the month following the month your income increased. For example, if you have a change that occurred today, you must report by the 10th of next month.

If your household receives other benefits in addition to Basic Food, you must report according to Washington Administrative Code 388-418-0005.

You will be told in writing how the change affects your food benefits. If you do not agree, you may talk to your eligibility worker, a supervisor or the community services office administrator. If you still do not agree, you may ask for an administrative hearing.

## **If I am eligible, when will I receive my food benefits?**

When you first apply, your benefits will be issued soon after we receive all the information we need to decide that you are eligible. Normally this will be within 30 days from the



date you apply. If you need benefits right away and are eligible for expedited services, you will receive your benefits within 7 days of your application.

After your initial allotment is issued to you, the day of the month you receive your food benefits will not change. Your food benefits will be available to you sometime between the first and the tenth day of each month. The specific day your food benefits are available is based on the last number in Food Assistance Unit (AU) number and is printed on your approval notice for food benefits. You may also contact 1-877-501-2233 to find out when your benefits will be available each month.

Your benefits are available on weekends and holidays, and any benefits you have not spent by the end of the month are carried over to the next month.

## **How long will I receive Basic Food?**

**When you are eligible for the Basic Food Program you will receive a letter from us that tells you:**

- If you are eligible;
- How many months in your certification period; and
- The amount of food benefits you will receive.

Half way through your certification period (six months for most



households) you will receive a Mid-Certification Review to complete. We use the report to update information about you, the people in your home, your household income, and certain expenses. This is to make sure you are receiving the correct benefit amount. You can also complete the review over the phone.

About 45 days before your Basic Food is set to expire you will receive a notice with an Eligibility Review form to fill out if you still want food benefits.

### **Complete and return the Eligibility Review form to:**

DSHS Customer Service Center  
PO Box 11699  
Tacoma, WA 98411-6699

You will be given a letter to have an interview over the phone or in your local DSHS Community Services Office. You must complete this interview to find out if you are eligible to receive more food benefits.

### **Does the Department have a Non-Discrimination Policy?**

In accordance with Federal law and U.S. Department of Agriculture policy, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, political beliefs, or disability.



**To file a complaint of discrimination, write:**

USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights  
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20250-9410

or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TTY). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

## **What is the Washington EBT QUEST card?**

The Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) system is a safe, convenient, and easy way for you to get your food benefits each month.

- You must use the card to get your benefits.
- The card works similar to an ATM card, but the food benefits on it can only be used to buy food.
- Your benefits will be put in an account set up for you.
- Your benefits can only be used with your secret personal identification number (PIN)



## What is an EBT PIN?

Every time you use your card, you must enter 4 secret numbers. These numbers are called a:

PIN (Personal Identification Number)

\*\*\*\* = PIN (4 secret numbers)

### These are the ways to get a PIN:

- If you get your card at your local DSHS office you will choose your PIN at that time.
- If the card is sent to you through the mail – you must call Customer Service to choose your new or replacement PIN.

Do not throw it away! You need these 4 numbers and your card to get your benefits.

Do not write your PIN on your card and do not share your PIN with anyone not in your household! Keep your PIN in a safe place and not in the same purse or wallet as your card.

If you lose your card or it is damaged, the PIN is still good. A replacement card will have the same PIN. The PIN will not change unless you ask that it be changed.

## What is an alternative card holder?

You may choose someone else to help you use your benefits. This person is called an alternate card holder.

### The Alternate Card Holder

- Is chosen by you.
- Will receive their own Washington QUEST card and PIN at a local DSHS office
- Will be able to spend your benefits.

If you choose someone to be your alternate card holder, choose a person you trust. Remember, lost or stolen benefits will not be replaced. For more information or to get an authorization form, call 1-877-501-2233.

## When should I call EBT customer service?

EBT Customer Service  
1-888-328-9271

TTY State Relay Number  
1-800-833-8388

Braille TTY State Relay Number  
1-800-833-6385

**Call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week toll free when:**

- You need to know the balance in your food or cash account.
- Your card is lost, stolen, or damaged.
- You want to hear your last 10 transactions for your cash or food benefit account.
- You want a replacement card or PIN by mail.

**Customer Service Representatives can also help you:**

- Find a place nearby where you can use your card.
- Get a 2-month history of your transactions.
- Report problems with ATMs.
- If you speak a language other than English.

# What can and can't I do with my EBT card and benefits?

Misuse of your Washington QUEST card is a state and federal crime!

## Appropriate Use

You or a member of your household may use your Basic Food benefits to buy food items such as:

- Breads and cereals
- Fruits and vegetables
- Cheese, milk, and other dairy products
- Meats, fish, poultry, and eggs
- Most other food items that are not sold as prepared hot foods
- Seeds and plants that produce food

## Illegal Use

It is not legal to:

- Use food benefits on your EBT card for any purpose other than to buy food for eligible household members.
- Exchange your food benefits for anything of value (trafficking). Examples of illegal trafficking include exchanging food benefits for cash, drugs, weapons, or anything other than buying food from an authorized retailer.
- Give your benefits to anyone who is not in your Basic Food household.
- Use Basic Food benefits to buy non-food items such as cigarettes, tobacco, beer, wine, liquor, household supplies, soaps, paper products, vitamins, medicine, or pet food.



## **Penalty for Illegal Use**

If you intentionally misuse your Basic Food benefits, you may be:

- Disqualified and lose your benefits for at least one year and up to a lifetime. The disqualification continues even if you move to another state.
- Subject to fines.
- Subject to legal action, including criminal prosecution. DSHS will cooperate with state, local, and federal prosecuting authorities to prosecute trafficking Basic Food or SNAP benefits.

## **Use your benefits on time**

Your food assistance benefits are intended to meet the current needs of your household.

- If you do not use your card for months, we may contact you to see if you are having difficulty using your card or if you still have a need for food assistance.
- If you do not use at least some of your benefits within 365 days, the benefits will be cancelled and may not be replaced.

- Q: Can you use your EBT card out of state?
- A: The Washington QUEST card is accepted nationwide at retailers participating in the EBT program. Look for the QUEST sign or check with the store before trying to use your QUEST card. Stores that sell food may or may not participate as providers of cash benefits. ATM access for cash benefits will depend upon whether the ATM is operating as part of the QUEST network.
- Q: Can you return a purchase made with your card?
- A: Yes! For example: if milk you just bought is spoiled, you can bring the spoiled milk and the receipt back to the store. Your food account is credited for the return. You will not receive cash for the return if the item was purchased using your food benefits.
- Q: Can I get cash back from the food benefits on my EBT card?
- A: No. Any food benefits you have not used at the end of the month will be available in the next month.
- Q: If I move out of state, can I keep receiving Basic Food?
- A: Basic Food is for Washington residents only. You will need to call the customer service center at 1-877-501-2233 to close your case so you can apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits in the state where you now live. You can still use the benefits that were issued on your EBT card while you lived in Washington.

Take a Fresh Look



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