

Food Stamps

Food stamps is a government program that gives you benefits so that you and your family will not go hungry. You get an Electronic Benefit card (Golden State Advantage) that you can swipe at the grocery store counter or certain other places to pay for your food.

Many people who qualify for food stamps do not get them because they don't think they qualify, are embarrassed, or do not know how to apply. If you need food, you should apply; everyone deserves to have enough to eat.

WHERE CAN I USE FOOD STAMPS?

- Almost every food store
- Many certified Farmer's Markets
- Some meals-on-wheels programs
- Certain restaurants can accept food stamps from homeless, disabled or elderly participants
- Some shelters are authorized to take food stamps as payment from clients

▶ What Can I Buy with My Food Stamp Card?

- Any food item except hot foods that are meant to be eaten immediately (except at certain restaurants)
- Seeds to grow your own food.
- Food stamps cannot be used for non-food products such as soap or diapers.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Each month you get help to buy food. The highest (maximum) amount your household can get is listed on the chart in the next column. Most people do not get the maximum amount.

in Household Maximum Amount

1	\$149
2	\$274
3	\$393
4	\$499
5	\$592
6	\$711
7	\$786
8	\$898

For each additional person, add \$112 (Accurate until Sept. 30, 2005)

▶ 1. General Eligibility

To get food stamps, you must be a U.S. citizen or a legally immigrated non-citizen (see page 58 Guide for Non-Citizens") You must also meet the limits on your income and resources. You don't have to have a home or a place to cook to get food stamps.

Some persons do not qualify:

- **SSI recipients** in California cannot get food stamps because a food allowance is included in the SSI grant.
- If you are convicted of a **drug related felony for sales or manufacture** occurring after August 22, 1996, you will be permanently ineligible for food stamps. If your felony was for possession or use of drugs, you can get food stamps if you show that you are in a drug recovery program, OR have completed one OR are on a waiting list for one, OR sign an affidavit that you are no longer using drugs.
- You can be permanently disqualified from the program if caught selling food stamps worth over \$500.
- Strikers and their families are usually kept out of the program, unless they meet the income limits one day before the strike. Employees who honor a picket line of another union, who are laid off as a result of the strike, or who are locked out are not considered strikers and may be more likely to qualify.

▶ 2. Special Rules for Students

Some full time students can't get food stamps. Students between the ages of 18 and 49 who are enrolled at least half-time in a program of higher education can get food stamps if they are doing any one of the following:

- Enrolled in CalWORKs
- Working and getting paid at least 20 hours per week
- Receiving a work-study grant
- Responsible for the care of a dependent child under age 12 if a full-time student

▶ 3. If You Get Free Meals

If you do not pay for any of your meals, you may not be able to get food stamps. Even if you don't prepare your meals, however, you may be able to get food stamps, if you live in a non-profit shelter for domestic violence or homeless people, a drug or alcohol treatment facility, federally-funded housing for the elderly, or a group home for the disabled or blind. Some facilities can collect your food stamps from you if they use them to feed you.

▶ 4. "Households"

The term "household" has special meaning in this program. It does not mean you have a house. A household can be one person who lives alone, or it can be a group of persons, related or unrelated, who live in the same place. There is no limit to the number of "households" that can be in the same home. If each "household" buys and prepares their own food separately from the other households, they are a "separate household."

Some relatives who live together must be included in the same household, even if they do prepare their meals separately. These are:

- Your immediate family—you, your spouse, your children age 21 and under
- Your parents and you (unless you are over 21)
- Those who are acting as parents for a child under 18, unless the child is in foster care.

Relatives who can be considered separate households even if they live in the same place include:

- Parents living with their adult children (over 21)
 - Adult brothers and sisters.
- Teen parents who reach the age of 19 and are taken out of their own parents' CalWORKs case are still eligible for food stamps. The parents' income must be counted, but the food stamps should not just be cut automatically—call Legal Aid if this happens.

5. Income Limits

Income test one: You can have income and also get food stamps if the household's "gross" or "total" monthly income is below the following limits. If you are disabled or age 60 or over this limit does not apply to you.

# in Household	GROSS Income Limit
1	\$1009
2	\$1354
3	\$1698
4	\$2043
5	\$2387
6	\$2732
7	\$3076
8	\$3421
For each additional person, add \$ 345 (Accurate until Sept. 30,2005)	

Income test two: Some income does not count for the second test. It is "deducted" from your "gross" income. (See page 37 "How Many Food Stamps Do I Get.") The result or "net" income after the deductions must be below the following limits. This limit applies to everyone, including aged and disabled people.

# in Household	NET Income Limit
1	\$776
2	\$1041
3	\$1306
4	\$1571
5	\$1836
6	\$2101
7	\$2366
8	\$2631
For each additional person, add \$265 (Accurate until Sept. 30, 2005)	

Income that doesn't count ("deductions") includes:

- Money for someone who is not in your food stamp household
- Money earned by children 17 and under who go to school at least half-time
- Reimbursements or advances
- Money paid for you to a third party by someone who is not legally obligated to pay you, (for example if your grandparent pays your rent directly to the landlord)
- All loans, including most educational loans
- Federal payments to help you pay energy bills or for emergency heating and cooling installations

- "Earned Income Tax Credit" for one full year after you get it
- CalWORKs homeless assistance money
- Foster care payments (when the foster children are not part of the food stamp household)
- Agent Orange Settlement Fund payments.

6. Resource and Property Limits

In addition to meeting the income limits, your household may not have certain resources ("assets") worth more than \$2000. If a member of the household is age 60 or over, or disabled, this limit is \$3000.

THESE RESOURCES COUNT:

- Cash-on-hand as well as money in bank accounts, money from inheritances, some pension funds, lump-sum back payments from insurance, CalWORKs, and Social Security

- Land you own that you do not live on or rent out
- Tax refunds (but not the Earned Income Tax Credit.)

THESE RESOURCES DON'T COUNT:

- The house you live in and the attached land
- Vehicles
- All resources excluded under CalWORKs or SSI rules
- Earned Income Tax Credit
- Life insurance and some pension funds
- Things needed to produce income such as tools, rental property, and farm land
- Burial plots.

7. Rules about Cars

A new rule says that for Food Stamps it doesn't matter if you own a vehicle. However, cars may still be counted against you if you are applying for cash aid. The worker can ask if you have a vehicle on your cash aid application, but not for your food stamps.

HOW DO I APPLY?

Call (877) 597-4777 for information on the food stamp program and the nearest location to apply. You normally apply at a DPSS office but a few alternative locations such as health clinics have been approved. (see page 66 "Welfare Offices.")

1. Emergency Food Stamps

You may be eligible to get food stamps the same day or at least within 3 days if one of the following applies:

- You can't pay your rent, mortgage payment or utilities because your monthly income and cash-on-hand is too little
- Your gross income is less than \$150 per month and the money you have on hand or in the bank is less than \$100

To apply for emergency food stamps, you only need to sign and date the application and statement of facts. The worker will ask for your proof of identity, residence, income, and resources, but you cannot be denied for not having these documents with you.

There are many ways to prove your identity, including your driver's license, a sworn statement, a phone call to someone who knows you, a library card, or a letter addressed to you.

If your case is approved, an EBT card and PIN number will be issued no later than the third calendar day after you apply so you can access your food stamp benefits. If the third day falls on a weekend or holiday, you have the right to receive your food stamps on that Friday, or the last workday before a holiday. If you apply after the 15th you will get the stamps for that month and your next month's stamps.

2. Non Emergency

Application: You have the right to apply in your own language and to turn in a written application on the day you go in. You will only get benefits as of the date you turn in the application. If someone tells you to come back without submitting the application, you may insist on filing an application.

Fill out the application form as completely as you can, circling the numbers of the lines where you cannot

answer or need help. Turn the application in and wait to be seen or make an appointment to see an eligibility worker. If you are not seen in a half-hour, go to the reception desk and ask for the Customer Services Representative.

You can call toll-free (877) 597-4777 to have an application mailed to you, fill it out and send it in by mail, or have someone else turn it in for you. You will still have to be interviewed.

Interview: You may bring someone along to help you. You may be asked to sign a form making them your "authorized representative." You will go over the application you filled out and will be asked for additional information.

You should be given a list of documents that you will need to complete the application process. You may be given a "return appointment" to turn in the documents. If you do not have all the necessary documents, you or someone you know may sign a statement explaining why not.

You may be able to receive benefits while you continue to gather the required information. The eligibility worker should help you get some of your missing papers.

If everyone in your household is disabled or 65 years of age or over you may request either that an eligibility worker be sent to your home at a time you agree to or that you be interviewed by phone.

A worker may also visit or phone you if no adult in your household can go to the office for good reasons such as illness or disability.

Fingerprints: To get food stamps, all adults and teens 18 and older, and an adult getting food stamps for children even if not for the adult, must be fingerprinted. If you are scheduled for fingerprinting at a later day that will not work for you, explain and request another time.

Next steps: Write down your worker's name, phone number, and phone hours. If you are asked to mail additional papers to the welfare office, ask the worker for a stamped envelope addressed to him or her. If you take in papers, get a receipt. Keep your own copy of all the paperwork. If you need help and your

worker is not available, the duty worker or a supervisor must help you.

Within 30 days of your applying, the welfare office must either mail you an EBT card and PIN number and a notice of approval or inform you in writing that you do not qualify and the reason why not.

The notice of approval tells you how long you are eligible (usually a "certification period" is 12 months) and how much the benefit is worth.

If you are denied food stamps, and believe you are eligible, request a hearing or call a legal aid organization. (see page 64 "Good Advice.")

Any time your income, expenses or other circumstances change, report this on the form called "QR 7."

Nutrition Education: The University Of CA Cooperative Extension has a free program to help Food Stamp participants purchase foods for a better diet through nutrition education. Call (323) 838-8329. The web site is www.fsneq.ucdavis.edu.

WHAT REQUIREMENTS DO I FACE?

1. Quarterly Reports

You must fill out a QR-7 form every three months. **THIS IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT!** On the QR-7, you will be asked to report your income, property and household composition. You will also be required to report any changes in your income, property or household composition that you anticipate in the next three months. Your eligibility and benefits for the next three months will be based on the information you provide on your QR-7. Under certain circumstances, you must report changes before your required reporting month.

You will be assigned to a Quarterly Reporting cycle based on the last digit of your case number. Your eligibility worker should let you know the months you are required to submit a QR-7.

If you get the form in the mail, you must fill it out and return it to the DPSS office by the fifth day of your reporting month. You should receive your QR-7 about

one month before it is due. If you don't get it in the mail, you must go to the DPSS office to complete the form. Make sure to get a receipt showing the time and date you submitted the form. If your QR-7 gets lost, or you do not turn it in, your case will be suspended at the end of the month.

2. Recertification

Also, you must be reviewed for benefits each year before the end of your certification period or your food stamps will be cut off. You will receive a letter that tells you the application for this review is due. Be sure to complete this on time so you can continue to receive food stamps without a break.

3. Food Stamp Work Registration

All Food Stamp household members age 16 through age 59 who are not exempt are required to be registered for work. That means you must agree to:

- Respond to a request of additional information regarding employment status or availability for employment
- Report to a suitable employer if referred
- Accept an offer of suitable employment
- If working more than 30 hours per week, not voluntarily reduce work hours to less than 30 hours per week
- Cooperate with the requirements of any welfare-to-work program you are assigned to: GAIN, GROW, RITE, REP, Employment & Training program, or Food Stamp workfare.

In Food Stamp workfare, the number of hours you do is based on the amount of your Food Stamp benefits divided by minimum wage. Workfare is usually doing some kind of work assignment for the county, like cleaning the beach or helping in an office.

You will be exempt from work registration if you are earning at least 30 hours times the federal minimum wage (presently this is \$154.50 weekly), or working at least 30 hours per week, or any one of the following:

- Under age 16 or age 60 or over
- A student in school or training at least half time.
- Caring for a disabled person or child under age 6
- Receiving or applied for unemployment benefits

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- Participating in a drug or alcohol treatment and rehabilitation program
- Determined by DPSS to be unemployable
- Participating in GAIN, RITE, or REP.

Under food stamp law, certain kinds of employment are considered "unsuitable," so you do not have to accept these jobs to qualify or remain eligible for food stamps. A job is unsuitable if one of the following applies:

- It does not pay the minimum wage
- It is harmful to your health, or unsafe
- It is beyond your mental or physical capacity
- The daily commute is over 2 hours
- It forces you to resign from a union or prohibits you from joining a union
- It forces you to break a strike
- Adequate transportation is unavailable

WHAT PENALTIES DO I FACE?

If you don't comply with a work or work-training requirement, or quit a job without good cause, you can be cut off from food stamps until you correct the problem. The penalties get more severe each time:

- **The first time** DPSS says you have not complied, you can be denied food stamps for at least **one month**.
- **The second time**, you can be denied food stamps for at least **three months**.
- The **third time** and after, you can be denied food stamps for at least **six months**.

Only the person breaking the rules will be denied, not the whole household. If you are penalized for any reason, you can get back on the program if you become exempt from having to comply with the requirement for any of the reasons listed above.

► "Good Cause"

"Good cause" for quitting a job or not doing a work project includes events beyond your control, such as:

- Illness of yourself or a household member who needs your care
- Injury
- Transportation problems
- Inability to speak or write English
- A household emergency
- Lack of adequate childcare for a child age 6 to 11.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS?

► 1. Fair Hearing

You have a right to a "fair hearing" if you feel you were unfairly denied or to correct any mistakes (see pg 62.) If you appeal within 10 days or up to the day the action takes effect (whichever period of time is longer), your usual benefits will continue until the matter is resolved. You have a right to look at your own case file and read a copy of

the food stamp program rules if you have a dispute with the county.

► 2. Lost or Stolen Card

You must report a lost, stolen or demagnetized card immediately to the EBT 24 hour Customer Service Center (1-877-328-9677.) Once reported, the card will be deactivated so that the benefits cannot be used by anyone else using your card. A new card will be issued right away so you will receive it in three business days.

Food Stamp Calculation Worksheet:

The following worksheet will give you a basic idea of how many food stamps you might be entitled to. However, if your circumstances are complicated, this worksheet may not apply completely to you.

1. Start with your household's gross monthly income _____
2. Subtract 20% of your gross **earned** income _____
3. Subtract "the standard deduction": \$134 for household of less than 5 people, \$153 for 5 people, \$175 for 6 or more _____
4. Subtract child care expenses that you pay up to \$175 per child (age 2 or older) or \$200 per child (under 2 years) if the child care allows a household member to work, look for work, or train for work _____
5. Subtract medical expenses over \$35 per month that aren't covered by insurance, Medicare or Medi-Cal, for each person in the household who is over age 59 or who gets disability payments. (This includes money spent for prescriptions, dental care, health insurance, glasses, health-related transportation, and some attendant care like IHSS). _____
6. Subtract child support payments made by you or payments made to children not in the home _____
7. Total (income after deductions) _____
8. Actual rent or mortgage, hotel costs, or shelter costs (if homeless, enter \$143) _____
9. Utilities: Zero if included in the rent. If not included, enter the larger of either your actual expense or \$206 ("the standard utility deduction.") _____
10. Telephone: Zero if you have other utility costs. If you do not have other utility costs, enter the larger of either your actual expense or \$20. _____
11. Total of lines 8, 9, and 10 _____
12. Divide line 7 in half _____
13. Subtract line 12 from line 11 _____
14. Excess Shelter Deduction (including rent, mortgage, hotel costs, or shelter costs): If line 13 is larger than \$388, enter \$388. If line 13 is less than \$388, enter the amount on line 13. If a household member is over age 59 or receiving disability payments, enter the amount on line 13 even if it is over \$388. _____
15. Subtract line 14 from line 7 _____
16. Maximum Food stamp Benefit for household size (see chart pg 33) _____
17. Enter 30% of line 15 _____
18. Food Stamp Benefits: subtract line 17 from line 16 _____

You cannot get more than the maximum benefit amount (line 16).