

FNS Pre-Screening Tool and General Frequently Asked Questions

For even more FAQs click [here](#).

What is the Food Stamp Program for?

The Food Stamp Program helps Americans put food on the table. It served 17.2 million people in Fiscal Year 2000. If you qualify for food stamps, you get coupons or an electronic card. You can use them like cash at most grocery stores to buy food. This food can help you eat a healthy diet.

Food stamps come from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), through their Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). Every state, plus Washington, D.C., Guam and the Virgin Islands, operates a Food Stamp Program. Each state sets some rules for who can get food stamps. It also gives out the food stamp benefits to people living in that state.

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Who is the Food Stamp Program for?

You must meet some requirements to get food stamps. If you are not a U.S. citizen, you might not be eligible. If you are an adult who isn't working and doesn't have kids, you might be eligible only for a limited amount of time. To find out more about who is eligible, contact your local food stamp office. You can also call the national food stamp toll free number, 1-800-221-5689, to receive a packet of information about the program. You can also visit our web site at [www.fns.usda.gov](http://www.fns.usda.gov).

To be eligible to get food stamps:

Your household must have no more than \$2000 in resources. In the "Ihelp" section, you can find out what counts as a resource. Your home and land do not count. If you live with someone over 60 years old, or a disabled person, you can have \$3000 in resources.

You must have a gross income no more than 130% of the Federal poverty guideline. This means the total amount of money you get before taxes cannot be more than that number. For a family of three that number is \$1,628 per month. For smaller households it is less, and for bigger households it is more. If an elderly or disabled person lives with you, you don't need to meet this requirement.

You must have a net income no more than 100% of the Federal poverty guideline. This is the amount of money you get after deductions. Deductions are things you have to spend money on, such as rent, or childcare. The money spent on allowable deductions doesn't count, because you can't spend it on food. For a family of three the net income guideline is \$1,252 a month.

If you are an adult, and you are not elderly or disabled, you may have a work requirement.

Every household member who wants to get food stamps must have a Social Security Number, or apply for one. But a person in the household who does not want food stamps does not have to have a number. However, that person must still provide financial information if other household members are applying for food stamps.

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I just tried the pre-screening tool. Now how do I apply to get the food stamps?

Call, go to your local food stamp office, or check if the application form is available on the Internet. To apply you must get an application form and fill it out. You can turn in the first page or the whole application the same day you get it. You can also call the office, and ask them to mail the application to you. You can mail it back when you finish it. You can sometimes fax it back to the office. You might also be able to pick up an application at a food bank, church, or senior center. After the office gets your application, they give you an appointment for an interview.

If you get the food stamps, your first set of benefits starts with the day the office gets your application. So you want to hand the application in as soon as you can. If you can't fill out the whole application, just fill out the first page. You just need to fill out your name and address, and sign the application. The office will still give you an interview when they get the application. So you don't need to fill out the other pages to get the interview.

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I tried the pre-screening tool. It told me I might be eligible. Can you send me the application right now? No. We are sorry, but we can't do that. Each state has its own application form. So you have to call or visit your local food stamp office to get your application form. Also, some food banks, senior centers, and other community groups might have application forms available. You might also be able to find the application on your state web site.

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Can I apply for food stamps online (on the Internet)?

Probably not. The only states that let you do that are Washington State and Pennsylvania. Some other states are working on setting up a web site so you can apply for food stamps online. But only Washington and Pennsylvania have web sites ready right now.

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How do you decide how much I will receive in food stamp benefits?

It depends on how much money you have. The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) is a model for how much money a household should spend on food. The amount of food stamps you get is the TFP amount for your household minus 30% of your net income. So if you spend 30% of your net income on food, but you still can't spend as much as the TFP says you should, food stamps give you the rest. If you have no net income, you get all of the TFP amount. This is because you can't spend any income on food. For a household of three people, this is usually \$366 each month. The TFP amounts are a little higher in Alaska, Hawaii, Guam and the Virgin Islands. This is because it costs a little more to live there.

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What is the average benefit from the Food Stamp Program?

In 2002, the average benefit each month was about \$80 per person. It was about \$186 per household. The household number is bigger because most households have more than one person in them.

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How do you stop people from cheating the program?

The USDA tries very hard to prevent cheating in all of its programs. The Food Stamp Program is very important because it is so big and so many people use it. But because it is so big, some people may try to cheat.

People who lie about their economic situation, or deliberately withhold information to get benefits they don't qualify for, can be taken off the program, required to repay benefits, and even jailed. Retailers who break the rules can face heavy fines, removal from the program, or jail. People who sell their food stamps instead of using them can be taken off of the program.

Most food stamps now come on electronic cards, not paper coupons. These cards are called Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards. They work like bank debit cards. Because of the EBT cards, it is much harder to cheat the system. This is because every time someone uses an EBT card, the transaction is recorded.

As of October 2002, 46 states use EBT cards for food stamps. Some states also use them for other programs. These include the USDA Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program.

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How do you stop people who are not eligible from getting food stamps?

The USDA and State agencies check to make sure that local offices give out the correct amount of food stamps. Food stamp workers check each application to make sure that the right number of benefits is given out. They require you to prove the things you say on the application, and then match your answers with information from other sources. A state that makes too many mistakes in giving out benefits can get fined by the USDA.

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How do I get more information about food stamps? About food stamp rules and policies?

You can always check with your local food stamp office. There you can learn about eligibility rules and apply for food stamps. The USDA has a toll-free information hotline at (1-800-221-5689).

For more information about any of the 15 USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) nutrition assistance programs, you can contact FNS. Call the communications staff at (703-305-2286). Or send mail to 3101 Park Center Drive, Alexandria, VA 22302. You can also e-mail to [FSPHQ-WEB@fns.usda.gov](mailto:FSPHQ-WEB@fns.usda.gov).

You can also look at the FNS website at [www.fns.usda.gov](http://www.fns.usda.gov).

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How do I answer the questions on the Pre-Screening Tool?

You answer questions about your household by first clicking on each question with the mouse. Then you can type an answer with the keyboard, or sometimes click an answer with the mouse. If you do not know how to use a mouse, a keyboard, or the Internet, go to the Internet Basics tutorial. To find it, click on "Internet Basics" at the bottom of the first page of the tool. You can also find it after you have started using the tool. Use the mouse to click on the word "Tutorials" at the upper right corner of the tool. A little window will pop up on the computer screen. Then click on "Internet Basics Tutorial" in the window.

There are also two other tutorials to help you use the tool. You can find both of them in the pop-up window. The "Prescreening Tool Tutorial" explains what each question is asking. You can also find it at the bottom of the first page of the tool. Just click on "How to Use this Tool" at the bottom of that page. The "Entering Information Tutorial" shows you how to use the computer to give an answer to each question.

There is also a help page that explains other things the pre-screening tool asks you. To find it, start the tool, and then click on "Help System" in the upper right corner of the page.

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Do you keep my information private and secure when I use the pre-screening tool?

Yes. The tool is secure and private. The questions never ask you to identify yourself. So all the information you give is anonymous. For a full list of privacy policies, and disclaimers, click [HERE](#).

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Does my state have special rules for vehicles? How do I find out?

You can click [HERE](#) for the State Vehicle Chart. Some states count vehicles as assets or resources, and some do not. Some states have other rules about vehicles. The State Vehicle Chart will tell you what the vehicle rules are for your state.

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I don't understand a question. What do I do?

The pre-screening tool has three Tutorials to show you how to use it. It also has a Help page. To learn what each question is asking, click on "How to Use this Tool" at the bottom of the first page of the pre-screening tool. To learn how to use the computer to answer the questions, click on "Internet Basics" at the bottom of that page.

After you have started to use the tool, you can still use these tutorials, and other assistance pages as well. On the upper right corner of any page, you can click on "Tutorials." Then a window will pop up. If you click on "Internet Basics Tutorial" in that window, you go to the Internet Basics Tutorial. If you click on "Pre-Screening Tool Tutorial," you go to the tutorial on how to use the tool. If you click on "Entering Information Tutorial," you go to a tutorial that shows you how to give your answer to each question.

If you need help with certain words or questions, you can also click on "Help System." You can find "Help System" in the upper right corner of every page, right next to "Tutorials." When you click on it you will see a list of words the tutorial uses. Each one is explained to you.

You can also find this Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page while you are using the tool. It is in the upper right corner of the page, right next to "Help System" and "Tutorials." If you click on "FAQs," this page will pop up for you.

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