HEALTHY START

Delivering Healthy Start
A guide for health professionals
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About this leaflet
This leaflet is for health professionals and provides information about the Healthy Start scheme. It describes how the scheme could help health professionals deliver more targeted, individualised care for pregnant women and mothers with young children.

It also provides health professionals with the key public health messages for pregnancy, the postnatal period and the early years of a child's life, covering:
- diet and nutrition
- breastfeeding
- weaning
- allergies
- smoking
- alcohol
- drug misuse.
What is Healthy Start?

Healthy Start is a government scheme that encourages pregnant women and families from low-income groups to eat a more nutritious diet. It does this by giving them vouchers to buy healthier foods as well as free vitamin supplements. It also encourages them to make earlier contact with health professionals.

Those eligible for Healthy Start can get vouchers to exchange for milk, fresh fruit, fresh vegetables and infant formula milk at participating retailers. To get the vouchers, they will need to have their application signed by a health professional, who will in turn be able to identify potentially vulnerable women more easily.

Who qualifies?
The qualifying criteria for Healthy Start (below) describe who can benefit from the scheme.

You qualify for Healthy Start if you are pregnant or have a child under four years old and:

- you or your family are receiving Income Support
- you or your family are receiving income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- you or your family are receiving Child Tax Credit (but not Working Tax Credit) and have an annual family income of below £14,155 (2006/07).

Or:

- you are pregnant and under 18 years of age.

Where to get the application forms.
You can download or order the forms and other resources about Healthy Start from:
Website: www.healthystart.nhs.uk
Telephone: 08701 555 455
"After I’d had my baby, I called the Healthy Start helpline and found out that I now qualify for an extra £2.80 a week!"
Healthy Start and health professionals

A health professional is required to complete and sign Part B of the application form to confirm the expected date of delivery (EDD) and/or the date(s) of birth of any children under four years old. It is important that Part B is fully completed, or the application form cannot be processed.

You are not required to check that an applicant is getting the benefits they claim to be, nor to report any subsequent changes in their circumstances once they are on the scheme.

Healthy Start will give you an opportunity to identify women who may be at risk of poor health outcomes and offer services to meet their needs. You will also have an opportunity to pass on important messages about nutrition and health at a time when the woman is likely to be interested and receptive.

Midwives and GPs should have the Healthy Start application form available for the first contact, for example a booking appointment, to encourage them to make their application early. Pregnant women can receive vouchers from the tenth week of pregnancy. Health professionals working with parents and carers of children under four years old should also make the application form available to encourage them to find out if they are eligible for Healthy Start.
Nutrition, health and health inequalities

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that good nutrition during pregnancy and in the early years of a child's life can prepare them for healthy adulthood. A healthy diet can help reduce the risk of obesity, heart disease and some cancers.

The Panel on Child and Maternal Nutrition of the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy (DH, 2002) produced a report on the Welfare Food Scheme and acknowledged that good maternal and child nutrition affects long-term health outcomes. This view is also held by the World Health Organization.

Health inequalities

While many people eat well, a large number do not, particularly among the more disadvantaged and vulnerable in society (DH, 2004a). The Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health (Acheson, 1998) emphasised the influence of poverty, education and early nutrition on health inequalities. The report recommended policies to improve nutrition, reduce food poverty and prevent childhood obesity.
The health departments in England, Scotland and Wales consider that maternity services should be proactive in engaging all women, but particularly those women from disadvantaged groups and communities, early in pregnancy and maintaining contact up to and after birth (DH, 2004b; NAW, 2005).

Women in disadvantaged groups are significantly less likely to:

- access maternity services early
- maintain contact throughout their pregnancies
- have a well-balanced diet
- breastfeed their babies.

Women from disadvantaged, vulnerable or excluded groups—including pregnant teenagers—are more likely to have poorer maternal and neonatal outcomes; for example:

- infant mortality
- low birthweight
- smoking in pregnancy
- postnatal depression.

Consequently, the outcomes for their own and their babies' health and well-being are worse than for the population as a whole.

Healthy Start aims to help health professionals redress this imbalance by encouraging contact earlier in pregnancy and by giving nutritional support through milk, fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, infant formula milk and vitamin supplements.