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Changing Families,
Changing Food.

Healthy Start

Researchers

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Summary

In November 2006, the longstanding UK Government Welfare Food Scheme for low-income pregnant women and their children, which provided liquid and formula cow's milk, was replaced by a new food support benefit called 'Healthy Start' which includes fresh fruit and vegetables as well as milk and infant formula milk; supports breastfeeding; provides free vitamin supplements; and encourages earlier and closer contact between health professionals such as midwives and health visitors and families from disadvantaged groups.

This research examines practices in maternal and infant nutrition in a disadvantaged community. Focus is given to the assessment of dietary intakes, feeding and eating patterns of low-income pregnant and postpartum women and their infants under the Welfare Food Scheme, and a comparison with the introduction of 'Healthy Start' on these behaviours. Two cohorts are included- a pregnant and a postnatal sample of white women living in Sheffield UK, before and after the introduction of the new benefit.



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Research questions

- Do low-income pregnant and postnatal women in Sheffield have an adequate and 'healthy' diet and which maternal characteristics influence eating patterns?
- What proportion of babies are breastfed and what are the weaning practices of mothers in Sheffield?
- Has the introduction of the new 'Healthy Start' initiative influenced the dietary intakes and eating patterns of pregnant and postnatal women in Sheffield?
- Has 'Healthy Start' affected the way that new mothers in Sheffield feed their infants?



Research design

The project is a 'before-and-after' study comparing nutritional behaviour of participants, who were beneficiaries of or eligible for the Welfare Food Scheme (Phase 1) or Healthy Start (Phase 2). Face-to-face, interviewer-administered, closed-question questionnaire interviews were conducted. Dietary intakes of the two groups were assessed at 20 weeks of pregnancy and at each month during the first year of the baby's life using standardised and validated dietary methodology. Information on the anthropometric, socio-demographic and behavioural characteristics of the participants was also obtained.

Key findings

- Our research findings suggest that a significant proportion of participants do not meet the nutrient recommendations for a healthy and adequate diet during and after pregnancy and fail to meet the 5-a-day target for fruit and vegetable consumption.
- This study also shows that pregnant and postnatal women benefited under the new scheme and have increased their food consumption. A higher proportion of them than the earlier scheme met the recommended intakes for key nutrients like calcium, folate, iron and vitamin C but at a cost of a considerably increased calorie intake. The results also suggest that 'Healthy Start' women ate significantly more portions of fruit and vegetables per day.
- Concerns related to uptake of the new benefit and uptake of the vitamin supplementation have been raised as the results suggest that not all participants received advice or heard about the new scheme and none of the participants reported receiving vitamin supplements.
- The results also suggest a strong relationship between maternal socio-demographic and lifestyle characteristics and infant feeding practices. Around a third of babies in Sheffield are breastfed and early introduction of commercial baby foods was observed.

Publications

Ford F A, Mouratidou T, Wademan S E and Fraser R B (2008) Effect of the introduction of 'Healthy Start' on dietary behaviour during and after pregnancy: early results from the 'before and after' Sheffield study. *British Journal of Nutrition*, accepted for publication

Mouratidou T, Ford F A and Fraser R B (2008) Infant feeding practices of Caucasian women post partum living in Sheffield, UK. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*; 67 (OCE): E209

Ford F A (2006) Healthy Start: replacing milk tokens. *RCM Midwives Journal*. 9(9): 342-44

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