

Evaluation of the Healthy Start voucher scheme on maternal vitamin use and child breastfeeding: a natural experiment using data linkage

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Plain language summary

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What was the problem?

United Kingdom governments have introduced many policies to support infants and their families. Most of these policies have not been evaluated in terms of health outcomes. Therefore, there is limited evidence for policy-makers about whether or not the right policies are in place to make a difference to the health of young children and their families.

What did we do?

We investigated the impact of the Healthy Start voucher scheme (worth £3.10 per week to spend on milk, fruit and vegetables) on the health of low-income mothers, and their infants and young children, in particular vitamin use of mothers and breastfeeding of infants.

What did we find?

Using survey data, there were high rates of vitamin use during pregnancy, but fewer women taking vitamins before pregnancy. There was no effect of Healthy Start vouchers on taking vitamins before or during pregnancy. There was inconclusive evidence of the effect of Healthy Start vouchers on breastfeeding, indicating that use of the vouchers does not discourage breastfeeding in women with low incomes. From interviews with mothers, we found that they valued the Healthy Start vouchers and understood the aims of the policy. Healthy Start vouchers were not mentioned in decision-making around breastfeeding. Women's choice to breast or formula feed was based on a range of other factors, such as support to breastfeed. They wanted to provide a healthy diet for their families, but owing to living on low incomes did not always manage it.

What does this mean?

Policy-makers still need more evidence about the effects of voucher schemes to improve the health of low-income mothers, and their infants and young children. The decision-makers require evidence to determine where to allocate limited resources. There is a need to improve support for low-income families to provide their families with a healthy diet.

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