

**Maternity staff in Lothian, who have been working with families to improve access to the scheme, have seen a 17 per cent rise in the number of pregnant mums getting the Healthy Start vouchers.**

Healthy Start is a UK-wide initiative providing food and vitamin vouchers for pregnant mums and families on low incomes.

Food vouchers worth £3.10 a week – which can be used to buy fresh and frozen fruit and vegetables, milk or infant formula feed – are available for pregnant women and families with children up to the age of four.

Families with children under one can get two vouchers (£6.20 per week). Families also receive vitamin vouchers every eight weeks.

After finding that just three-quarters of those eligible in Lothian were registered for Healthy Start, midwives made some simple changes to improve access to the service.

Sign up has since jumped from 14 per cent to 21 per cent of pregnant women booking for antenatal care in Lothian, although not all these women are receiving vouchers yet.



***More low income families across Lothian are now receiving free food vouchers through a government scheme – thanks to a drive by NHS Lothian.***

Dr. Graham Mackenzie, Consultant in Public Health, said: “Although the Healthy Start programme has been running for many years, we knew that one in four families in Lothian who were eligible were not signed up for vouchers.

“Those that were eligible often experienced delays in signing up or missed vouchers at key points, including when their baby was first born. “We started making small changes to address some of the barriers that we felt might be stopping more families accessing the scheme.” “For example, our midwives started to sign pregnant women up to Healthy Start at their booking appointment instead of waiting until their first scan.” “Midwife teams also followed up with eligible women at 16 week antenatal visits to see if they had received their vouchers.”

“We also discovered that many families missed out on valuable financial support after their baby was born because they didn’t know that they needed to call the [Healthy Start helpline \(0345 607 6823\)](tel:03456076823) and give them the baby’s name and date of birth– otherwise the vouchers stop.” “Pregnant women and families struggling to complete the application form are offered support from literacy and parent support workers.”

Families interested in finding out more about Healthy Start and whether they are eligible should talk to their midwife, health visitor or GP surgery or visit the website at <http://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/>

Dr. Mackenzie added: “The vouchers can make a real difference to those facing financial hardship. “For example, a woman receiving vouchers from 10 weeks of pregnancy to the child’s fourth birthday will receive £899 in total over that period.

“That is invaluable support for a healthy start in life.”

(source: MacInness, J.A (2015) Linlithgow Gazette <http://www.linlithgowgazette.co.uk/news/health/free-food-vouchers-for-families-in-need-1-3682292> published 09.02.2015, accessed 10.02.15)

