

Healthy boost for low income families during pandemic

A quicker, simpler application process for Healthy Start food vouchers has been welcomed by Greater Manchester health leaders amid concerns around food poverty during the coronavirus pandemic.

The changes mean families no longer need a health professional, such as a midwife or health visitor, to complete and sign the application form.

Healthy Start vouchers worth up to £6.20 a week are available to pregnant women and parents of children aged under four who receive certain benefits such as income support or jobseeker's allowance. Anyone who is aged under 18 and pregnant is also eligible. The vouchers can be used to help buy basic healthy foods such as fresh fruit and vegetables, milk or infant formula.

Free vitamins are also available for pregnant women and young children. However, take up across Greater Manchester is low with an estimated £4 million in vouchers going unclaimed each year. It is hoped that the latest changes will help to boost the numbers of families signing up to the scheme.

Jane Pilkington, executive director for population health at Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership, said:

"Many vulnerable families across Greater Manchester will need help right now to buy healthy food, at a time when health professionals are stretched and have limited capacity. Hopefully these changes will help to ease that pressure and encourage pregnant women, parents and carers to claim the Healthy Start vouchers they are entitled to."

'We want all children in Greater Manchester to have the best possible start in life and a healthy; balanced diet is a big part of that. Eating well means that children have the energy to learn and play and are less likely to develop health problems later in life. The benefits begin before they're born so it's important that pregnant women are able to access healthy foods too.'

Low income families can find out how to apply for Healthy Start Vouchers at www.healthystart.nhs.uk