



Monday, March 8th 2021

Healthy Start – what’s on the shopping list in Wales?

In December 2020, the Welsh Government [announced](#) that it would be increasing the value of the [Healthy Start](#) vouchers in Wales from £3.10 a week to £4.25 to provide support with nutritional intake amongst children and families on low incomes. This increase will come into effect in April and will coincide with the digitisation of the scheme across the UK.

But what exactly is Healthy Start? And how does it benefit families in Wales? Here, [Food Sense Wales](#) explains.

The Healthy Start scheme is a Government initiative that provides eligible families with vouchers every week to spend on milk, fresh, frozen, and tinned fruit and vegetables, fresh, dried, and tinned pulses, and infant formula milk

The scheme supports families in receipt of certain benefits, specifically helping pregnant and breastfeeding mums, and children under the age of four. Women and children receiving Healthy Start food vouchers are also given vitamin coupons to exchange for free Healthy Start vitamins, specifically designed for pregnant and breastfeeding women and growing infants and pre-school children.

So how much are the vouchers currently worth?

- Pregnant women get one Healthy Start voucher a week worth £3.10. This will increase to £4.25 in April.
- Babies under the age of one get two vouchers a week worth a total of £6.20. Again, this will increase in April to £8.50
- Children aged over one and under four get one voucher a week worth £3.10, increasing to £4.25 in April.

From April, a mother with a baby under the age of one and a child under the age of four, could therefore be eligible for £12.75 a week to spend on milk, fruit, veg and pulses – an amount that could make a significant difference to a family’s life.

A statutory scheme that's run by the NHSBSA (National Health Business Services Authority), vouchers can only be issued on the receipt of a completed application form which is available on the [Healthy Start website](#). Currently, the vouchers are paper-based and recipients have to exchange them in store for their goods, but from April onwards – at the same time as the increase in value is due to take effect - the NHSBSA is launching a digitised Healthy Start Scheme that will replace the current paper vouchers with a pre-paid card. This will mean that the scheme should be simpler to access and more flexible to use.

But while we wait for both the increase in voucher value and digitisation of the scheme to take effect in Wales, a number of supermarkets have committed to either increasing the value of Healthy Start vouchers spent within their stores or have said that they'll provide additional free fruit and veg to people using the vouchers. Many have pledged to do this in an effort to help families in need of additional support and as a direct response to Marcus Rashford's Food Poverty Task Force and its End Child Food Poverty campaign.

Here's a quick reminder of the offers available in supermarkets in Wales:

Retailer	Added Value	Available until
Co-op	Adding £1 to the value of the voucher. Before April this equates to £4.10, after April this will be £5.25.	No set date but likely beyond April 2021
Tesco	Adding £1 to the value of the voucher. Vouchers must be presented at the checkout for recipients to receive a 'money off' reusable coupon of £1 to redeem off their next shop.	31 March 2021
Lidl	Adding £1.15 to the value of vouchers which voucher recipients will be notified of at the till.	31 March 2021
Iceland	Offering free frozen veg worth £1 per voucher. Recipients will be able to bring the vegetables to the till with their shopping or be informed of the deal at the till if they've not collected any frozen vegetables	31 March 2021
Waitrose	Adding £1.50 to the value of the voucher so £3.10 becomes £4.60. The extra value is added at the till when a HS voucher is presented	No set date but likely beyond April 2021

NHS data currently shows that the uptake of the Healthy Start scheme in Wales is in decline, meaning that a significant number of eligible families are missing out on support that they're entitled to. In Wales, in January 2021, only [57%](#) of those eligible for Healthy Start vouchers actually used the scheme.

So what can be done to increase uptake in Wales?

In a recent [blog](#) published by [Sustain](#) – the alliance for better food and farming, it was noted that in addition to the increase in the amount of the vouchers, more could be done to inform families that they're entitled to this support. It says that the eligibility criteria needs to change so that more can benefit from the support calling for the scheme to be extended to all families in receipt of Universal Credit. Currently only families receiving Universal Credit that earn £408 or less a month from employment are eligible for the scheme. The blog continues to say that these changes would revolutionise the Healthy Start scheme so that it becomes a properly resourced, cash first approach that puts healthy food back on the table for those who need it most.

In Wales, there are other initiatives underway to help to encourage and increase uptake of Healthy Start.

After conducting a piece of research into the uptake and spending potential of Healthy Start vouchers, [Food Cardiff](#) realised that awareness of the scheme was low with some frontline staff, advising people on which benefits they were entitled to. Working in partnership, Cardiff and Vale Public Health Team, Cardiff Council's Money Advice, Cardiff and Vale University Hospital Board dietetic team, and Food Cardiff developed a training package to support frontline staff to raise awareness of food schemes, adopting a train-the-trainer approach to maximise reach. The train-the-trainer sessions started in May 2019 and continue to be run for staff from various organisations involved in delivering frontline services, such as Housing Associations, Cardiff Council's Money Advice Team, Help Me Quit and Wellbeing4U.

"The training encompasses information about the Healthy Start scheme, eligibility and accessibility," says Helen Griffith, Senior Health Promotion Specialist in the Cardiff and Vale Public Health Team.

"Information about food banks, food co-ops, nutrition information and Nutrition Skills for Life courses were also provided. Through sourcing and reviewing information about the different food schemes, we produced a suite of resources to facilitate training delivery and support frontline staff during consultations with clients. In terms of uptake, the most recent data shows that Cardiff is performing better than the rest of Wales which could be in part attributed to this scheme – helping frontline staff to understand food related benefits and to recognise their importance, and to outline who is eligible and explain how individuals can apply."

In North Wales, within the Betsi Cadwaladr Health Board, Public Health Dietitian Andrea Basu is focusing on uptake of the vitamins amongst families already signed up to Healthy Start – exploring barriers and solutions to increasing accessibility of Healthy Start vitamins for eligible families.

"The Healthy Start women's tablets give the right amount of folic acid and vitamin D to support a healthy pregnancy, and the vitamin drops for babies and children contain a vital dose of vitamin D to help build and protect their future bone health," she says.

Andrea goes on to explain that Vitamin D is especially important to take as a supplement because our daily diet just doesn't provide enough. We get most of the vitamin D we need through exposure to sunlight, but in the winter months, and of course during the current lock down period we are spending much more time indoors. The only way we can be sure to get enough vitamin D is to take a supplement and Healthy Start can help young families to achieve this.

"Most people hear about the scheme through their Midwife or Health Visitor, but we know the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on the ability of families to access the vitamins," she adds.

Andrea's currently working on a new project working with local pharmacies who have agreed to stock the vitamins.

"Pharmacies are ideally located in our community and we want to make it as straightforward as possible for families to get the vitamins they need and are entitled to receive. For families already signed up to 'Healthy Start' in Flint and Wrexham, they simply need to take their green voucher into any of the following pharmacies to collect their vitamins – Rowlands Pharmacy in the Brynteg, Cefn Mawr, Chapel Street, Hightown, Johnstown and St George's Crescent areas of Wrexham; Rowlands Pharmacy in the Buckley, Flint, Holywell and Queensferry areas of Flintshire as well as Morrisons Pharmacy in Saltney and Connah's Quay."

The main aim of the Healthy Start scheme is to give children in Wales the best possible start in life. It also provides health professionals and others working with pregnant women and families the opportunity to offer encouragement, information and advice on issues such as healthy eating, breastfeeding and vitamins.

With an increase in the voucher value; the digitisation of the scheme and an anticipated re-brand of Healthy Start, it is hoped that more eligible parents will learn about the scheme and that a greater number of people will access it, utilising the money that's available to help them feed their families. Life is an honest struggle for many right now, particularly young families, and 'Healthy Start' could provide welcome support.

ENDS

Food Sense Wales and the Healthy Start Scheme

Food Sense Wales leads on the work of [Peas Please](#) in Wales, a programme that as part of its work is facilitating conversations with retailers around the Healthy Start scheme, making it easier to use as well as encouraging uptake, making veg more accessible to families.

Focusing specifically on veg, Peas Please bring together farmers, suppliers, retailers, restaurant chains, caterers, processors and government departments with a common goal of making it easier for everyone to eat veg.

Food Sense Wales is also working with Welsh Government on its [Healthy Weight Healthy Wales](#) strategy, a long term strategy to prevent and reduce obesity in Wales and encouraging people to become more motivated, enabled and supported to make healthier choices throughout their lives. The Healthy Start scheme is one of the enablers that could help to establish healthy habits early in life giving babies and young children the best possible start and reducing the risk of poor physical and emotional health throughout childhood and into adulthood.