

# Mothers-to-be in Britain will get £200 to spend on healthy food

Women's Health News  
Published: Monday, 10-Sep-2007

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## Mothers-to-be in Britain are being given a grant by the government to spend on healthy food.

Under a new government initiative, from April 2009, £200 will be paid into expectant mothers's bank accounts as a one-off payment from their 29th week of pregnancy to encourage them to eat healthily.

The Health secretary Alan Johnson will introduce the "Health in Pregnancy Grant" this week in an attempt to reduce infant mortality rates and close the health inequality gap.

Although many have welcomed the idea some charities warn it may not be effective as there appears to be no measure in place to ensure the cash is spent on healthy food and some women they say will spend the money on drink or cigarettes.

They also say babies need good nutrition before 29 weeks and most babies in need of support are born before 29 weeks' gestation.

The premature baby charity BLISS says there is no measure to ensure the cash is spent on healthy food and poor diet is only one of many potential factors that contribute to premature birth and low birth weight.

Infant mortality rates have dropped in Britain but this in the main has been more evident among the affluent sectors of society rather than poorer socioeconomic groups.

The government wants to see a 10% reduction in this gap by 2010 from the baseline year of 1998 and experts say it is known that poverty and nutrition play a role in pregnancy health, but it can be difficult for a mother to eat healthily when the family is poor.

Research has shown that women on a poor diet during pregnancy are more likely to have low birth weight babies which increases their baby's risk of poor health during childhood and during their adult life.

According to the government money is a "key determinant" when it comes to good health and healthy eating in expectant mothers.

Currently expectant mothers on low incomes are eligible to apply for a £500 grant from 29 weeks of pregnancy to help towards the cost of having a new baby.

The Health in Pregnancy Grant will not be means-tested but in order to receive the payment, a woman would have to consult a health professional for pregnancy health and welfare advice.

The National Childbirth Trust says the proposal appears good in principle as nutrition in pregnancy is very important but efforts will need to be made to ensure that the funding directly benefits women and their babies nutritionally.

The Royal College of Midwives says there is a real and worrying widening of the health inequality gap and any move to improve the health and well being of pregnant women and their unborn child is a positive step.

Experts say a long term and committed focus on public health with a significant increase in resources is needed to tackle health inequality.

A new report about to be published is expected to criticise the lack of progress on tackling increasingly unhealthy lifestyles which have led to Britain's obesity epidemic.

The report apparently highlights poor eating habits, people's increasingly sedentary routines and the growing number of overweight people as areas where more determined action needs to be taken.

There is however little research which shows that a financial incentive, combined with nutritional advice, is enough to persuade mothers from the most deprived areas to change their lifestyle.

Underweight babies, i.e. those who weigh less than 5.5lbs, are not only at greater risk of dying in infancy, but face long-term difficulties such as heart disease, diabetes, lung conditions and impaired cognitive development because their growth has been retarded in the womb by a lack of essential nutrients.

Another problem driving the high number of underweight babies is the fact that Britain also has Europe's highest rate of teenage births, with an average of 26 children born to every 1,000 women aged between 15 and 19.

That is more than four times the rate in Cyprus, Slovenia, Sweden or Denmark and this could also be a factor in infant mortality rates.

There are also plans afoot to adopt a more interventionist approach which will include sending more nurses into deprived communities to support women who need the most NHS help but are most likely not to ask for it.