

FreeD: vitamin D supplementation in Lewisham

Increasing Healthy Start vitamin uptake in pregnant women, new mothers and children under four to prevent vitamin D deficiency

Background

Addressing Vitamin D deficiency, particularly among recognised at-risk groups is a key part of the UK Government's [Healthy Start](#) initiative, and the subject of NICE guidance on vitamin D supplementation.

The London Borough of Lewisham launched its vitamin D distribution scheme, known as [FreeD](#), in November 2013 in accordance with the NICE guidelines. In the early stage of planning, Lewisham asked [THERAPYAUDIT](#) to implement an online system to support the scheme, and [TASTART](#) was developed for the purpose of data capture and reporting.

The FreeD scheme

Eligible residents of the Borough register for [FreeD](#) at any participating Healthy Living pharmacy or Children's centre and are given a credit-card sized electronic card. On subsequent visits, the card is scanned and details of the vitamins dispensed are securely transmitted to the [TASTART](#) data centre. Summary reports showing uptake by age, ethnicity and Borough can be downloaded as required from the [TASTART](#) web site.

The overall impact of the scheme is that the uptake of Healthy Start vitamins has significantly increased as a result (see over).

Key aims

- To reduce cases of rickets and vitamin D deficiency in Lewisham
- To increase public and professional awareness of the importance of vitamin D supplements during pregnancy and breastfeeding and for children under 5
- To ensure that the promotion of breastfeeding will not increase the risk of vitamin D deficiency in breastfeeding mothers and infants
- To increase professional awareness of vitamin D requirements and understanding of the Healthy Start scheme
- To ensure better equity of access to vitamin D supplements and service consistency across the Borough
- To reduce consequent costs of testing and prescribing in primary care by promoting preventive action
- To promote wellbeing amongst target families by avoiding the negative physiological effects of sub-optimal vitamin D intake



Aims

The FreeD service aims to improve health outcomes and quality of life amongst Lewisham residents by helping reduce the growing incidence and cost burden of vitamin D deficiency and rickets in Lewisham. The scheme implements recommendations issued by the Department of Health on vitamin D supplementation for at-risk groups.

Context

Clinicians in Lewisham were reporting increased numbers of referrals, and identifying a growing number of children with vitamin D deficiency. The at-risk group for vitamin D deficiency includes people with darker skin (African, African-Caribbean and South Asian origin) and women with a pre-pregnancy body mass index (BMI) above 30kg/m². Prior to the introduction of a universal scheme, the uptake of Healthy Start vitamins had been very low owing to several factors, including eligibility and accessibility. It was recognised that implementation of supplementation of all at-risk groups would improve public health and could be cost-effective in the long run due to the increasing cost of testing and treatment.

Eligibility

- All pregnant women
- New mothers for 1 year after birth
- All children from 4 weeks until their fourth birthday

A key element of the implementation is that the service is run by **Health Champions** working in Healthy Living pharmacies, who have completed FreeD training.

Offering the service has led to increased footfall within the participating pharmacies and giving ownership of the service to the Health Champions has led to better delivery.

The Health Champion checks whether the participant is additionally eligible for the Healthy Start scheme and indicates this on the distribution record (and collects Healthy Start coupons). The scheme has now been extended to the Boroughs of Southwark and Lambeth. The development of the TASTART system was funded by Lewisham Public Health and any Borough wishing to implement a similar system can obtain an annual TASTART licence directly from [THERAPYAUDIT](#). Other costs include electronic cards, card readers, training, promotion and co-ordination of the scheme.

Results so far

The uptake by participating outlets is monitored via the [TASTART web app](#). On-demand reports showing uptake by ward, age of mother or child, and ethnicity are available via the app. Since its launch in November 2013, the scheme is reaching approximately **30% of eligible women** and children 0-4 years (with **over 50% of infants** under 1 year starting the drops). Uptake by beneficiaries of the Healthy Start scheme has increased **from 10% to 18% for women** and **from 6% to 18% for children**.

Note: The latest version of the NICE guideline is [PH56 - Vitamin D: increasing supplement use among at-risk groups](#), published in November 2014. Recommendation 6 refers to the use of an electronic card and rec. 11 to the monitoring & evaluation of the uptake.

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