



## Good enough to eat? The diet of pregnant teenagers

*A briefing paper from the joint SCDP and Maternity Alliance Seminar  
10 May 2004*

The Maternity Alliance<sup>1</sup> and the Food Commission<sup>2</sup> recently published a report, which described the diets of 46 pregnant teenagers across England over a 24-hour period<sup>3</sup>. Unsurprisingly, the study found that the majority of diets were low in energy, fruit and vegetables and high in sugary, fatty snack foods. While most of the young mums were aware of the basic components of a healthy diet, food choices for the majority were severely constrained by limited finances, especially for those living alone and unsupported, often with under £3 per day to spend on food.

*'Without sufficient cash, no amount of nutrition information and knowledge, and no amount of skill in food preparation will help improve these women's diets'<sup>4</sup>.*

The report calls for legislative change and makes over 17 recommendations to UK Government Departments, the Food Standards Agency and other key policy making bodies. Recommendations include raising benefit rates for all pregnant women, especially those under 25 years, which are currently set at a lower level; and for all pregnant women under 18 years to be entitled to Welfare Foods (Healthy Start<sup>4</sup>) as soon as they confirm their pregnancy. Currently they have to wait until they are 29 weeks pregnant.

One positive outcome of the research so far has been its usefulness in provoking debate and discussion amongst practitioners, researchers and policy makers

---

<sup>1</sup> The Maternity Alliance is a national charity based in London and works to end inequality and promote the health of all pregnant women, new parents and their babies. Web: [www.maternityalliance.org.uk](http://www.maternityalliance.org.uk)

<sup>2</sup> The Food Commission is a national, not-for-profit organisation based in London, which campaigns for the right to safe, wholesome food for all. Web: [www.foodcomm.org.uk](http://www.foodcomm.org.uk)

<sup>3</sup> Good Enough to eat? The diet of pregnant teenagers, April 2003. The Maternity Alliance and Food Commission. Web link: [www.maternityalliance.org.uk/documents/Summary\\_good\\_enough\\_to\\_eat.pdf](http://www.maternityalliance.org.uk/documents/Summary_good_enough_to_eat.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Healthy Start is the reformed Welfare Food Scheme. More information can be found at: [www.dh.gov.uk/Consultations/ResponsesToConsultations/ResponsesToConsultationsDocumentSummary/fs/en?CONTENT\\_ID=4017124&chk=BPDET8](http://www.dh.gov.uk/Consultations/ResponsesToConsultations/ResponsesToConsultationsDocumentSummary/fs/en?CONTENT_ID=4017124&chk=BPDET8)

around the UK. The Scottish Community Diet Project (SCDP)<sup>5</sup> assisted in this process by organising an afternoon seminar on the topic of teenage pregnancy and diet with the Maternity Alliance in May 2004.

According to the most recent figures, teenage pregnancy rates in Scotland are slowly declining for the majority of areas, with exceptions in Ayrshire and Arran and Tayside, which have the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Scotland.<sup>6</sup> While the *Good Enough to Eat?* Report is based on evidence from England, many Scottish pregnant teenagers face similar barriers when trying to access a healthy diet<sup>7</sup>.

The SCDP seminar attracted a diverse group of participants working across Scotland on food and health issues. The seminar had two main aims: to discuss the range of current activity already underway to improve the diet of pregnant teenagers; and to identify remaining challenges and ways of tackling them together.

The event began with a short presentation of *Good Enough to Eat?* by its authors, Annie Seeley and Helen Burchett. Afterwards, Helen Yewdall and Denise Black presented a local case study about the work of Sure Start West Lothian and its efforts to improve the diets of young parents. Employed by Sure Start West Lothian, Helen is a Health Development Practitioner and Denise is an Early Years Development Worker.

Sure Start West Lothian aims to promote social inclusion through a positive start to young children's lives. It gives special focus to food and nutrition in all its activities, and in particular within two new specialist antenatal services called YM2b and Dads 2b. The main focus of this case study was YM2b, which is a new course aimed at pregnant women under 20 living in West Lothian. Launched in April 2004, YM2b runs on a 12-week rolling programme, which young women can join anytime during their pregnancy. It covers all aspects of antenatal information and most importantly is a chance for pregnant young women to meet in a safe, supportive and non-judgmental environment.

The course content of YM2b was devised following consultation with local young mothers. They identified their own need for peer contact prior to birth in a non-medical and informal venue, which until the launch of YM2b, was unavailable. They also wanted information about parenting as well as about pregnancy and

---

<sup>5</sup> The Scottish Community Diet Project supports local communities throughout Scotland tackle inequalities in diet and health. It is funded by the Scottish Executive Health Department. Web: [www.dietproject.org.uk](http://www.dietproject.org.uk)

<sup>6</sup> NHS Scotland Information and Statistics Division Web: [www.isdscotland.org/isd](http://www.isdscotland.org/isd)

<sup>7</sup> Sure Start Scotland, April 2004. Web [www.scotland.gov.uk/surestartscotland](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/surestartscotland)

birth, and they wanted activities that would meet their specific needs as young people as many of them are without the support of a partner and some are still attending school and sitting exams.

While the course includes specific sessions about healthy eating and food preparation with input from specialist health staff, the social importance as well as the health value of eating is emphasised during each weekly session. Sharing a healthy lunch of home made soup, bread and fresh fruit supplied by the local community food co-op is one highlight of every Friday meeting. Soon the group hopes to have its own facilities to prepare lunch.

Within two months of launching YM2b, the uptake of breast-feeding has increased amongst young mums linked to the project. Participants also report a better understanding of healthy eating, especially during pregnancy. Many have also shown greater willingness to experiment with new and unfamiliar foods as well as cook more for themselves and their baby. For more information about this initiative, please contact Denise or Helen at Sure Start West Lothian. Tel: 01506 775836.

For the remainder of the afternoon, the group was asked to share its own experience of food initiatives for pregnant teenagers and to describe what worked well, what did not work so well and why. The following is a summary of workshop discussions.

***Tried and tested initiatives already taking place across Scotland with young parents:***

- ?? Cook and eat sessions – practical, fun workshops to build confidence and develop cooking skills. ‘Get Cooking Get Shopping’<sup>8</sup> is one approach to setting up classes. For young mums living in hostel or B&B accommodation, access to cooking facilities is often extremely limited.
- ?? Awareness of the group’s circumstances is vital when planning any session. Assumptions cannot be made. Participating in the group can often be a springboard for some young women to get support from other services such as housing. It is therefore essential that the group co-ordinator is aware of what help is available and has all the necessary contacts to pass on.
- ?? Weaning workshops with blenders sold or given to participants.
- ?? Having informal sessions with community dietician – discuss specific nutritional needs of pregnancy, cravings, food safety and breast-feeding. Food hygiene course are popular and useful for future employment.

---

<sup>8</sup> Get Cooking , Get Shopping, Updated by the Co-operative Group in 2001. To download, visit [www.co-op.co.uk/ext\\_1/Development.nsf/0/c01088326d59340d00256a8500545f0a?OpenDocument](http://www.co-op.co.uk/ext_1/Development.nsf/0/c01088326d59340d00256a8500545f0a?OpenDocument)

?? Linking with community dental services is also useful.

?? Taster sessions

?? Budgeting skills and looking locally at where to shop for best value.

***Issues to consider when wanting to access young mums and dads to be:***

?? The idea has to be 'cool' and have credibility with the target group. Peer-led approaches often achieve this. Involve the target group in the planning and development of the initiative from the outset to ensure ownership remains with the target group.

?? Some health care staff can be resistant to peer-led approaches so it is equally important to involve them too to help overcome possible barriers.

?? Consider the setting. Young mums can be uncomfortable and embarrassed around their non-pregnant peers, especially boys, so be aware of this sensitivity. Non-medical and non-school environments tend to be best. Always check out the suitability of a venue first. Consider facilities such as access to toilets, food preparation facilities, and access to public transport, especially in rural areas.

?? The atmosphere and environment of the setting is important too. It has to be fun and non-threatening. Encourage them to bring their own choice of music for breaks for example. Also ask the group to bring their own recipe ideas if food preparation is involved.

?? The timing of sessions is important – too early or too late is generally unpopular. Liaising with school is also important.

?? To get young people through the door provide drop in sessions – dance classes, yoga, relaxation, aromatherapy, salsa have worked in some areas. After trust and confidence is won, approaching issues such as food is easier. Providing a free lunch is another useful incentive.

***The success of an imitative relies heavily on it being integrated with other services. The following is a list of people and places that can be useful sources of support and at times funding for activities:***

- ?? Health care teams – GPs, midwives and community nursing
- ?? Schools – Integrated community school staff, health development officers
- ?? Community food and health project staff and volunteers. Also Healthy Living Centres.
- ?? Health promotion officers, public health practitioners and local authority health improvement staff
- ?? Sure start projects.
- ?? Teenage pregnancy co-ordinators - Glasgow is the first area in Scotland to have one.
- ?? Local authority departments including housing, social work, education.
- ?? Academic departments – often keen to work with groups to carry out joint research.
- ?? Potential funders – Sure Start Scotland, Scottish Community Action Research Fund (SCARF<sup>9</sup>), Better Neighborhood Services Funding<sup>10</sup>. Supermarkets have in some areas been useful too to provide free food for sessions or for funding.

The afternoon hoped to identify practical, realistic and local solutions to the problem of poor diet among pregnant teenagers in Scotland, and indeed it did begin the process of making links, sharing ideas, and discussing existing activity, concerns and challenges. It also highlighted the importance of services and projects working together both locally and nationally to meet pregnant teenagers' needs as defined by them.

The outcomes of this SCDP seminar will feed into the findings of a number of similar seminars being organised by the Maternity Alliance on the same theme around the UK. The SCDP hope to help disseminate this wider experience in the near future.

---

<sup>9</sup> SCARF. For more information, visit [www.scdc.org.uk/scarf\\_faq.htm](http://www.scdc.org.uk/scarf_faq.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Better Neighbourhood Services Fund. For more information, visit [www.scotland.gov.uk/about/DD/H3/00014328/page412523681.aspx](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/about/DD/H3/00014328/page412523681.aspx)