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Supermarket top-up of Healthy Start vouchers effectively increases fruit and vegetable purchases in low-income households

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Diet related inequalities in the UK food system have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, with low-income families experiencing more food insecurity⁽¹⁾ and purchasing less fruit and vegetables⁽²⁾. To improve access to affordable and nutritious foods, UK supermarkets voluntarily increased weekly £4.25 Healthy Start voucher (HSV) amounts. Notably, one supermarket provided an additional £2 top-up voucher, redeemable against fruit and vegetables (FV) from 15th February – 31st August 2021.

Investigating supermarket loyalty card transaction records, this study aimed to assess how increased HSV value affected FV purchases. Loyalty card transaction and redemption records from 150 opted in regular shoppers living in the Yorkshire and the Humber region and engaging in the HSV scheme were analysed. 133 of these shoppers' records were assessed from two equivalent time periods to the scheme in 2019 and 2020 and were analysed using a pre-post study design. The vouchers could be used on four different FV categories, plain fresh and prepared fruit and vegetables, and plain frozen, canned and packaged fruit and vegetables, according to internal definitions. The purchasing patterns of other FV were also analysed. Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-rank tests were used to compare purchasing behaviour within the scheme period at a basket level, and against pre-scheme periods at a household level. A Spearman's Rho test was used to assess the association between behaviour and level of deprivation around stores. Examining 21,707 transactions from 133 households for 20 months before and during the scheme, showed that 0.8 more portions of FV per day per household were purchased during the scheme period compared to 2019 (pre-pandemic) baseline (2.6 in 2019 to 3.4 in 2021; $P=0.0017$). The percentage of total FV weights within total food and drink baskets also increased by 1.6% ($P=0.0242$), although the percentage of total FV spend did not change. Within the scheme period, 0.4% ($P=0.0012$) and 1.6% ($P=0.0062$) more FV was purchased according to price and weight respectively in top-up redeeming baskets compared to baskets with at least one FV item. This finding was associated with 5.5 more FV portions in top-up redeeming baskets during the scheme period ($P<0.0001$). There was a higher proportion of top-up redeeming baskets in stores located in more deprived areas ($r=-0.3288$, $P=0.0373$). In conclusion, this study provides novel data into how low-income households shop and how an increased HSV amount is associated with FV purchases.

The data show that low-income families purchased more FV when supplied with an additional £2 to their HSV and provides evidence for a benefit to increasing support given to low-income families.

References

1. National Food Strategy (2021) [Available at: <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/>].
2. Jenneson V, Clarke GP & Greenwood DC (2022) *Nutrients* **14**, 177.