

Incentives to breastfeed and quit smoking backed by the young

July 21 2014, by Kelly Potts



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(Medical Xpress)—Men and women aged 44 or younger are more likely to agree with financial incentives to encourage breastfeeding and smoking cessation during pregnancy compared to those aged 65 and over.

This was a key finding in a new study led by the University of Stirling in collaboration with experts at the University of Aberdeen and Central Lancashire which looked to assess [public acceptance](#) of financial incentives to encourage [healthy lifestyle](#) choices.

The research, which was published in *BMJ Open* and funded by the

National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Health Technology Assessment (HTA) Programme, also found that those with higher qualifications, or from non-white [ethnic groups](#), and men, were more likely to support the incentives.

Pilot schemes in different parts of UK have offered [pregnant women](#) and new mothers a range of incentives including shopping vouchers in an effort to encourage [women](#) to adopt healthy lifestyles. Previous research has suggested these [financial incentives](#) can help to motivate women to make the best decisions for their baby's health.

This study examined existing research to consider what made it easier for women to continue breastfeeding and stop smoking and drew up a list of the seven most promising types of incentives.

Over 1000 members of the British general public from a cross section of society were then asked for their views.

Overall, the researchers found between a third to just under a half (34%-46%) of British adults surveyed agreed with one or more types of incentives. A free breast pump was found to be the most popular.

Lead researcher, Professor Pat Hoddinott from the University of Stirling's Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Professional Research Unit said: "Addressing health inequalities is a government priority so the implications of our research for efforts to reduce this inequity are important.

"Our findings are a concern because the highest levels of smoking during pregnancy and the lowest rates of breastfeeding are amongst the less educated and white British women – two of the groups showing lower levels of support for incentives."

Co-author Dr Heather Morgan of the University of Aberdeen said: "There are many reasons why some women continue to smoke in pregnancy and do not breastfeed. External influences – such as family and friends, work and the provision of additional support by health services – can all influence women's ability to make these lifestyle changes."

Dr Gill Thomson, a member of the research team from the University of Central Lancashire, said: "Evidence suggests incentives to promote behaviour change can be successful, because they can facilitate better relationships between recipients and care providers and can reassure people of their worthiness to receive help.

"However, this study tells us there are still challenges ahead in promoting the benefits to certain groups, particularly those who dislike pressure to behave in the way that the health service would like them to."

Professor Hoddinott added: "If incentives are offered to women and they don't work, women can feel very demoralised, particularly as every mother sets out to do the best for her baby. Some women may need other forms of support in addition to the incentive because healthy lifestyle choices can be difficult to maintain."

The researchers conclude that more research is needed to evaluate the proposed incentives' reach and impact on [health](#) inequalities and ethnic groups before they are implemented across the UK.

Provided by University of Aberdeen

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