

# Help me tell people about Healthy Start scheme to give kids a chance, Marcus Rashford urges health professionals

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The celebrated international footballer and child food poverty campaigner, Marcus Rashford, has called on healthcare professionals to

help spread the word about a [government scheme](#) designed to give young children in low-income households in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland a nutritious start in life.

The appeal, set out in an [open letter](#) in *The BMJ*, was prompted by concerns that more than 40% of those eligible for the free [food](#) vouchers, which can be exchanged for milk, infant formula, fruit and veg, and pulses, have yet to sign up to the scheme.

To qualify, applicants must be at least 10 weeks pregnant, have at least one [child](#) under 4, and be in receipt of a welfare benefit, such as Child Tax Credit or Universal Credit.

In the letter, Rashford highlights research published in September 2020 by [the Food Foundation](#), showing that around 14% of UK families with children had experienced food insecurity in the previous six months and couldn't afford, or access, sufficient food.

[The COVID realities research programme](#) has documented the effects on physical and [mental health](#) that living with [food insecurity](#) has on families, he adds.

Healthy Start makes a difference, he says. [Research](#) shows that it increases spending on fruit and vegetables and improves the nutrient content of household shopping, without increasing spend on other less healthy foodstuffs.

And its expansion has been endorsed by The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and The National Food Strategy to enable more families living in poverty to benefit.

Members of the Child Food Poverty Taskforce have been working hard to tell people about the scheme and how to access it, but: "While we

have seen 57,000 more parents benefit from the scheme as a result, I'm concerned we are plateauing," explains Rashford.

Healthcare professionals are ideally placed to bolster efforts to promote the scheme, he suggests. "You are for many—for many communities like mine—a lifeline. You provide an avenue to really be heard and to be seen," he writes. There's even a [simple calculator](#) to quickly work out eligibility, he says.

"In conclusion, and not to beat around the bush, we need you. Every single one of you," he pleads. "To help us reach those most in need in our communities, especially given the planned digitisation of the scheme this autumn, which will disproportionately disadvantage those without easy access to the internet."

A firm believer in the power of collaborative effort, he writes: "Long term, sustainable, change can only come when communities work towards a common goal. No child deserves to be starting life 20 yards behind any other child from the day they are born, just because of where they are born and the circumstances they are born into.

"All children deserve a chance."

Anna Taylor, Executive Director of The Food Foundation, comments: "Healthy Start is a great programme but too many people who could benefit don't even know about it. We need to do all we can to make sure that all those eligible can use it to help them afford to eat more fruit and veg."

**More information:** Every child deserves the best chance in life, here is how health professionals can help, [blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/08/04/m... ofessionals-can-help](https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/08/04/m...-ofessionals-can-help)

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