

- A partnership of public health researchers across the five universities in North East England
- Focused on working with policy makers and practice partners
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Financial incentives could help people make healthier lifestyle choices

People may be more likely to adopt healthier lifestyle behaviours if they are offered small financial incentives. They are more likely to quit smoking and attend vaccination and screening appointments if given cash or shopping vouchers as a reward.

Healthy lifestyle behaviours are important for ensuring a long and healthy life, yet, many people still struggle to follow lifestyle recommendations, in part because of the financial, environmental, and opportunity costs involved. One method increasingly suggested as a way to motivate people to be healthier is to offer financial incentives to those who successfully change their behaviours. In a large review of previous research, academics from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, found that people are more likely to adopt healthier lifestyle behaviours if they are offered financial incentives.

Health promoting financial incentives have proven difficult to define and people have used the term 'incentive' to describe a wide range of different things. In this review, financial incentives were defined as cash or cash-like (e.g. shopping vouchers) rewards that were only received if people changed their behaviour. The review also included schemes where people lost money if they failed to change their behaviour.

Although many evaluations of health promoting financial incentives have been conducted, few are high quality randomised controlled trials. Researchers from Fuse searched for randomised controlled trials (where one - or more - participant group receives a financial incentive, and one group does not) on financial

incentives for behaviour change. The review found 16 studies which involved over 30,000 participants. The studies focused on helping people to quit smoking, do more physical activity or attend for vaccination and screening appointments.

Key Findings

- Health promoting financial incentives were found to be more effective at promoting behaviour change than usual care (e.g. providing help leaflets) or no intervention.
- The review found limited evidence for a wide range of different health behaviours. The only high quality trials were on quitting smoking, physical activity and attending for vaccination or screening appointments.
- Alongside cash rewards, financial penalties where people handed over their own money and only got it back if they successfully changed their behaviours, were also effective.
- There was some evidence that people managed to stop smoking for up to six months after they stopped receiving financial incentives.
- More evidence is needed on the format, type (e.g. cash, voucher, reward, penalty), and amount of financial incentive that is most effective.
- All of the studies in the review were carried out in the USA. Further studies are required to see whether health promoting financial incentives are effective in the UK.

Policy relevance and Implications

- Health promoting financial incentives may be a useful addition to the behaviour change toolkit, particularly for helping people to stop smoking, become more active and attend vaccination and screening appointments.
- Financial incentives should be considered across a range of health behaviours, but more evidence is needed for other behaviours such as healthy eating and safe sun practices.
- The acceptability of health promoting financial incentives needs to be assessed in a range of people. The public, health practitioners and policy makers are all likely to have important views on whether incentives are an appropriate way to help people live healthier lives.

“Small financial incentives, of as little as £3, can make individuals 50 per cent more likely to change their behaviours”

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

Researchers from Fuse looked at 16 studies involving over 30,000 participants, to explore whether financial incentives were effective at promoting lifestyle behaviour changes. Cash or cash-like rewards and penalties were found to be more effective than usual care or no intervention for encouraging individuals to quit smoking, do more physical activity and attend their vaccination and screening appointments.

Emma L Giles, Shannon Robalino, Elaine McColl, Falko F Sniehotta & Jean Adams: *The effectiveness of financial incentives for health behaviour change: systematic review and meta-analysis.*

Web: www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0090347

FURTHER INFORMATION

Dr Emma L Giles
Email: E.Giles@tees.ac.uk
Telephone: 01642 384916

Fuse is one of five UKCRC Public Health Research Centres of Excellence. It brings together public health researchers from across the five universities in North East England.

Website: fuse.ac.uk/research/briefs
Blog: fuseopenscienceblog.blogspot.co.uk
Facebook: [facebook.com/fuseonline](https://www.facebook.com/fuseonline)
Twitter: @fuse_online
Email: info@fuse.ac.uk
Telephone: 0191 222 729

