

**PRIMARY CARE UTILISATION RATES IN PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN:  
THE LIFEWAYS CROSS-GENERATION COHORT STUDY**

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A main objective of the Lifeways cross generation cohort study is to examine how means-tested free primary care influences health during the first five years of life.

1124 pregnant women were recruited at the Coombe Hospital Dublin and University College Hospital, Galway. 1088 babies were born to 1076 mothers. Fathers (n=331) and grandparents (n=1231) were subsequently recruited. GP contact details were available for 1032 children. 772 GPs in 589 practices were approached in the follow-up of 3455 participants. Data was obtained on 2082 (60.3%) of which 640 were children (62%).

The mean follow-up time was 3.0 years (95% CI 2.5-3.5). 20.5% of children were eligible for free primary care i.e. had a current medical card. The mean GP consultation rate was 4.1 visits per child per year, 5.8 visits for children with a medical card and 3.6 for those without; a difference of 2.2 visits (95% CI 2.0-2.5) p=0.001. 133 children had ever been admitted to hospital; 27.2% with a medical card and 21.2% without, a difference of 6% (95% CI -2.8%-14.8%) p=0.16. 62 had a diagnosis of asthma; 20.1% with a medical card and 8.1% without, a difference of 13% (95% CI 5.3-20.8) p=0.0001.

Children with a medical card have higher GP consultation rates, more hospital admissions and a greater prevalence of asthma than those who pay for primary care services. These differences are likely to be explained by socio-economic factors. Barriers to accessing primary care with resultant unmet need should also be considered.