

Brits to get rewards for healthy behavior
Associated Press

LONDON -- The English city of Manchester has come up with a simple formula it hopes will help keep its citizens trim: eat right, get stuff. Exercise, get more stuff.

Manchester is hoping to fight fat with a reward system that works like a retail loyalty card. But instead of earning credit for opening their wallets, residents will be rewarded for keeping their feet on the treadmill and their fridge stocked with healthy food.

Starting next fall, Manchester residents will be able to swipe their rewards cards and earn points every time they buy fruits and vegetables, use a community swimming pool, attend a medical screening or work out with a personal trainer.

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Points can be redeemed for athletic equipment, donations to school athletic departments and personal training sessions with local athletes.

The money is coming from the government's health service and from local authorities.

"We're not looking for customers to be loyal to a particular store, but to help people make healthier choices," said Laura Roberts, the chief executive of Manchester's National Health Service.

One public health official said the program seemed worth pursuing even if it is untested.

"I haven't seen any evidence that it works, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try it," said Timothy Armstrong, a coordinator of the World Health Organization's global strategy on diet, physical activity and health. Armstrong said obesity was such a pressing issue that "as public health officials we really don't have the luxury of waiting to see what works and what doesn't."

He said he was particularly impressed that Manchester, which has a population of 2.5 million, had managed to rope grocery stores, advertisers, fitness clubs and private companies into the plan.

"We really do know that, in terms of curbing the obesity epidemic, all of society needs to play a role," he said.

Like other countries in the developed world, Britain is struggling to keep its citizens' waistlines in check.

Last year a government-commissioned report predicted that as many as 9 out of 10 adults could be overweight by 2050, costing the country's National Health Service more than 50 billion pounds (\$78 billion) a year.

Manchester's program is modeled after the kind of reward programs run by major British grocery chains, such as Tesco and Sainsbury's.

Health officials haven't determined how much effort it will take for people to win rewards, but they won't have to climb a mountain before they can earn something, said Andrew Lawton, one of the developers of the program, called Points4Life.

"Normally, if someone in the private sector was building a program, they would want to see a profit, but we're doing this altruistically, which means we can pass a good value back to the customers and patients," Lawton said.

Armstrong said the rewards program is worth trying, even if it means paying people to do what they should be doing anyway.

"I don't really like the word bribe, but if we can influence people to make the right choices, or healthy choices, we should make every effort to ensure that they do that," Armstrong said.