

# THE REAL DEAL

## Nutritional Profile of Snacks in Meal Deal Promotions



March 2022

# BACKGROUND

Excessive consumption of salt is internationally recognised to raise blood pressure, which is the major risk factor for strokes and cardiovascular disease (CVD). CVD is responsible for one in four deaths in England, equivalent to one death every four minutes [1], and so, the need for reducing salt intake is even more pressing.

The recommended salt intake in the UK is no more than 6g a day for an adult [2], however, the latest figures show we are eating on average 40% more than this (8.4g/day) [3]. Most of our salt intake comes from packaged and prepared foods, which cannot be removed by the consumer.

Lunchtime meal deals are a popular meal choice for many in the UK, with 1 in 3 consumers buying a meal bundle at least twice a week [4]. As Covid restrictions ease and many return to workplaces, there will likely be renewed interest in lunchtime meal deal choices, particularly due to their convenience and perceived value for money, an important consideration as we face a steep rise in the cost of living. Despite their popularity and convenience, the nutritional quality of in-store meal deals has not been widely discussed. Research by Action on Sugar in 2017 revealed certain meal deals contain up to 30 teaspoons of sugar [5], and a recent report by ShareAction reviewed promotional practices of the four largest supermarkets (Asda, Morrisons, Sainsbury's and Tesco) and found that up to 50% of promotions as part of a 'meal deal' promoted products high in fat, salt and/or sugar [6].

Store-bought lunchtime meal deals typically consist of a main meal component such as a sandwich, wrap or salad, a sweet or savoury snack and a drink. The snack offering varies depending on the store in question, but often includes crisps, nuts, cereal bars, fruit, and confectionary. Snacks are considered one of the top 10 contributors of salt intake in the UK population and are ranked the top 7 for contributing to both adults and children's salt intake [7].

Salt reduction has been a feature of UK food policy for two decades and is accepted globally as a simple and cost-effective strategy to improve public health. As well as voluntary reformulation to reduce salt consumption from food businesses, the government has also initiated measures to improve the overall nutritional profile of processed foods, with curbs on irresponsible marketing and sales of unhealthy food [8]. In 2021, the government announced that it would legislate to restrict the promotion of products high in fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) by location and volume price which will come into force in October 2022. Although location restrictions will apply to some HFSS items sold as part of meal deal promotions (i.e., not being near check-out counters or shop entrance), meal deals are, on the whole, exempt from promotion restrictions (e.g., 'buy one get one free', '3 for 2').

# AIM

The purpose of this report is to assess the availability of healthier snacks being offered as part of meal deals.

Businesses offering a meal deal promotion will be measured against three metrics:

1

**Proportion of products complying with the UK salt reduction targets**

2

**Proportion of snacks offered in meal deals which are high in fat, salt, and sugars (according to the Nutrient Profile Model)**

3

**Proportion of products with nutrition and health-based messaging which are also high in fat, salt, and sugars (according to the Nutrient Profile Model)**

## Data Collection

Action on Salt surveyed all snacks made available as part of high street meal deal offers. Data was collected from all major high street stores with an established lunch time meal deal. These included meal deal options at different price points (e.g., set price, choose 3 items for the price of 2) and typically contained a sandwich or salad as a main, a snack and a drink.

A scoping exercise revealed meal deal promotions were available at Asda, Boots, Co-op, Shell, Greggs, Morrisons, Poundland, Sainsbury's, Subway and Tesco. Full nutritional information of snacks included as part of the meal deal offering (energy, fat, saturates, sugars, fibre, protein, and salt per 100g and per portion) was collected online for most stores in January 2022 from retailers' websites. Additional data was obtained from product packaging acquired in store at Asda, Boots and Shell, as there was inadequate data online. Information for Subway was obtained online and via their apps. In addition to nutrition information, the use and type of nutrition and health-based messaging, as well as the full ingredients list, was recorded.

**Inclusion Criteria:**

All chilled and ambient snack categories such as:

- Crisps and extruded snacks
- Sweets and chocolate confectionery
- Cakes and pastries
- Bars and biscuits
- Meat
- Fruit & Vegetables
- Dried fruit and/or nuts
- Pastries and Pies
- Yogurt
- Cheese
- Sushi

**Exclusion Criteria:**

- Products that are out of stock or discontinued/currently unavailable online
- Drinks
- Main meal component of the meal deals e.g., sandwiches, salads, and wraps
- Snacks not included in meal deal promotions

## Data Analysis

**Salt Reduction Targets:**

Industry progress towards achieving the maximum salt reduction targets for 2024 were measured. Products were categorised into the most appropriate salt target based on their product names and 'legal title' found within the product description.

Salt target compliance of these snacks was assessed overall, and the proportion of snacks within meal deals with exceeding salt levels across stores were compared to each other.

**Snacks high in fat, salt, and sugar:**

Snacks available in each store were classified as high in fat, salt and/or sugar (HFSS) using the Department of Health & Social Care's Nutrient Profiling Model (NPM) [9]. Energy, saturated fat, sugars, and sodium (i.e., salt) are considered, as well as fruit/vegetable content, fibre, and protein, to establish an overall nutritional score. If foods scored 4 or more points, they are deemed HFSS.

The nutritional quality of snacks available across all stores were assessed, and then store's availability of HFSS snacks as part of meal deals were compared to each other.

## Nutrition and Health-based Claims:

The use of nutrition claims (something which states, suggests or implies that a food has beneficial nutritional properties) and health claims (any statement about a relationship between food and health) in the UK is currently controlled by the Great Britain nutrition and health claims (NHC) register [10], which follows European Regulation (EC 1924/2006). The claims must be factually correct and should not be used to encourage or condone excess consumption. But there are no other restrictions on what foods these claims can be used on, and in addition, food companies often use additional marketing terms and messaging for perceived healthfulness.

Products deemed HFSS and with nutrition or health claims were recorded, and the proportion of HFSS snacks with claims across stores were compared to each other.

100% Plant based Light  
Natural 50% Less fat Gluten free  
Source of fibre Reduced salt 1 of your 5 a day  
No MSG Vegetarian Reduced fat  
No artificial colours, flavours, or preservatives Less sugar Only Xkcal  
High in protein Dairy free Xg Protein  
High in Vitamin X Vegan

# RESULTS

- *Almost one in three (30%) snacks exceed their respective maximum salt targets*
- *Nearly three quarters (70%) of snacks offered as part of a meal deal are deemed HFSS*
- *Two thirds (64%) of snacks with a nutrition or health-based claim are also high in saturated fat, salt and/or sugars*
- *Sainsbury's ranked more favourably with healthier meal deal snacks available, with Subway lagging behind*

## DATA SUMMARY

A total of 533 products were collected across 8 high street stores, (Asda, Tesco, Co-op, Sainsbury's, Morrisons, Shell, Subway and Boots) with 360 unique products overall. At the time of collection, Marks and Spencer's, Waitrose, Lidl, and Aldi did not have a meal deal promotion. No data was collected for Gregg's as their meal deal offer does not include a snack. Poundland was not included as their meal deal was not available in any of the stores that were visited.

Overall, Boots and Tesco offer the biggest range of meal deal snacks on the high street, compared to Subway and Morrisons with the smallest. On average, crisps and confectionery products dominate most stores' snack offering (36% and 21% respectively), with fruit and vegetables accounting for only 5% across all 8 stores (Figure 1).

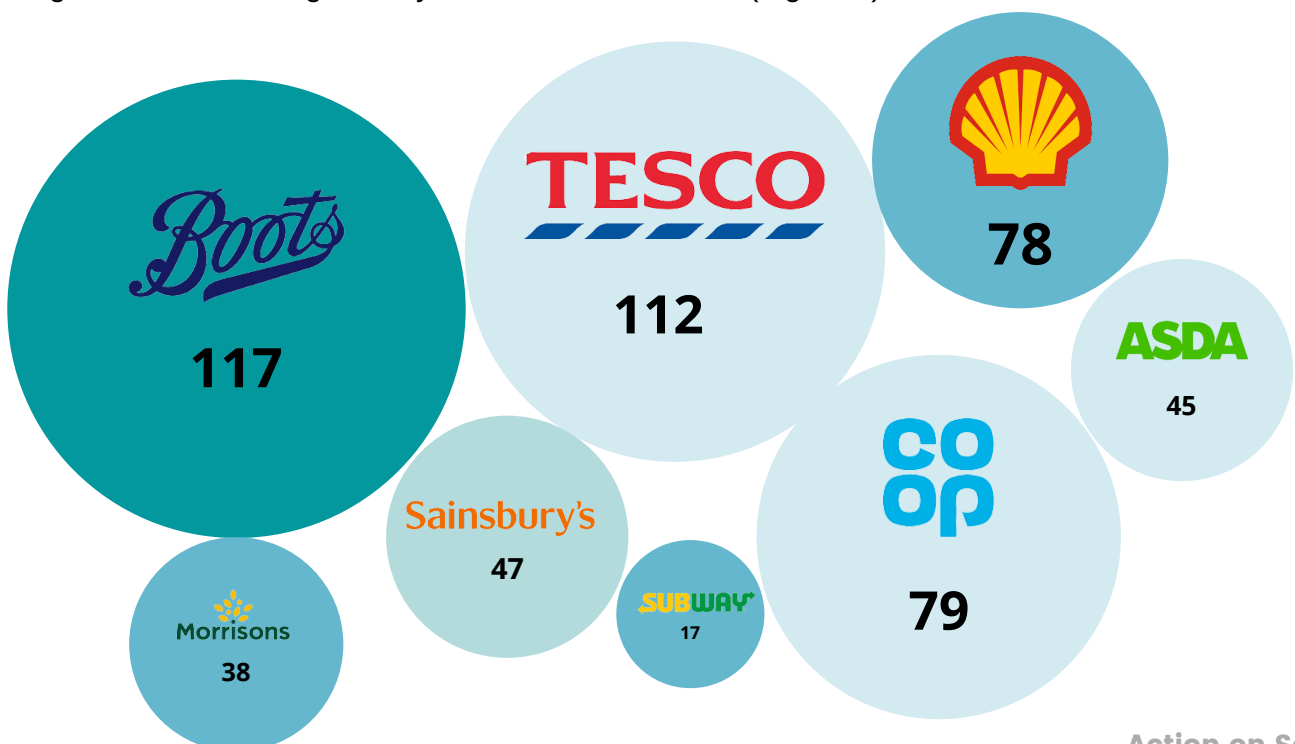
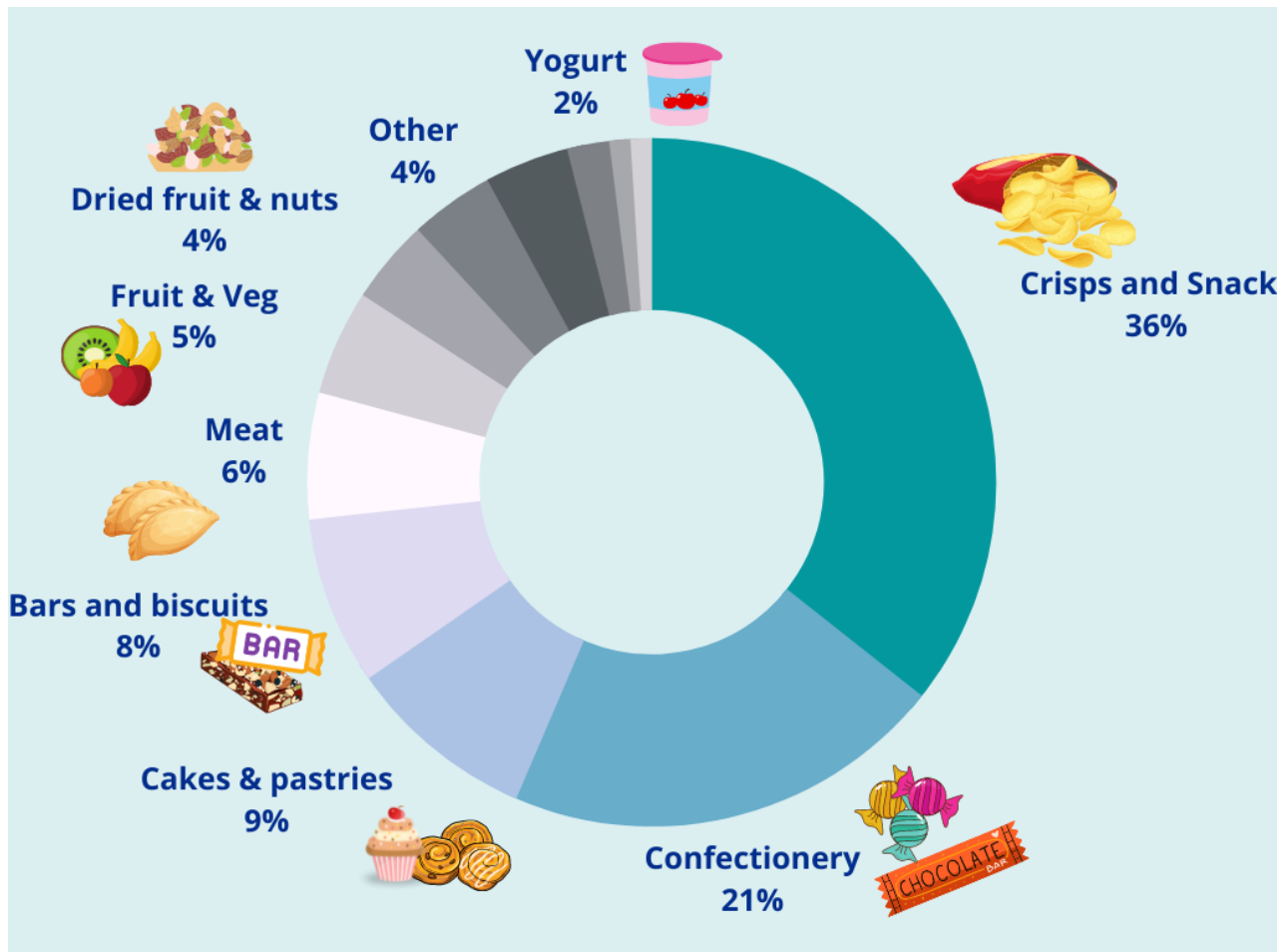




Figure 1. Different snack categories (average %) sold across all stores



## Metrics

### 1. SALT REDUCTION TARGETS

Out of 360 individual products included in the survey, 55% fall within an applicable salt reduction target. The number of products in each salt category varies across stores, but overall, a third (30%) of meal deal snacks exceed their maximum salt target, in particular meat products and biscuits (Table 1).

**Table 1. Broad category compliance towards the maximum salt targets**

<b>Broad Category</b>	<b>Number of products</b>	<b>Percentage compliance to maximum salt targets</b>
Cheese	2	100%
Out of home (chips and breaded chicken)	2	100%
Crisps and extruded snacks	105	79%
Bread products	4	75%
Scotch eggs	3	67%
Cakes and pastries	34	62%
Ready meals and meal centres	5	60%
Biscuits	22	59%
Meat products	21	48%

See Appendix I for complete breakdown of snacks and specific target compliance. No comments can be made on sales weighted averages.

When looking at individual stores, Morrisons offers a smaller proportion of snacks\* which currently comply with the salt targets, with Sainsbury's leading the way, however no store offered a choice of snacks that were fully compliant with the targets (Table 2).

\* This includes all snacks offered as part of their promotional meal deal – branded and own label



**Table 2. Proportion of snacks complying with the salt targets**

Store	Number of products	Percentage exceeding maximum salt targets
Morrisons	28	46%
Co-op	30	33%
Boots	61	31%
Tesco	66	29%
Shell	64	25%
Asda	34	24%
Subway	17	24%
Sainsbury's	37	19%

## 2. SNACKS HIGH IN FAT, SALT, AND SUGAR

Using the Nutrient Profiling Model, over two thirds of all of snacks surveyed (70%) would be considered a HFSS product.

Asda and Subway provide the highest number of unhealthy snacks (Table 3). Even Morrison's, which had the lowest proportion of HFSS snacks, offer predominantly unhealthy snacks at 63%.

**Table 3. Proportion of meal deal snacks high in saturated fat, salt, and sugars across stores**

Store	Number of products	Proportion of snacks high in saturated fat, salt and sugars
Subway	17	82%
Asda	45	82%
Co-op	79	81%
Shell	78	76%
Boots	117	75%
Tesco	112	71%
Sainsbury's	47	66%
Morrisons	38	63%

### 3. NUTRITION AND HEALTH-BASED CLAIMS

Nearly two thirds (64%) of snacks were reported to have some form of perceived nutrition or health-based message on pack or in the product description. These types of messaging are not restricted to healthier product ranges, with 70% also scoring as a HFSS food. Whilst these claims are legal, they have been shown to be misleading to consumers by creating a 'health halo' and discouraging shoppers from scrutinising the nutrition label more thoroughly.

When looking at individual stores, Subway offers a greater proportion of snacks with nutrition and health messaging, which are also HFSS. Co-op fares better than most stores, with 55% of the HFSS snacks on offer displaying a nutrition or health message (Table 4).

**Table 4. Proportion of products with nutrition claims that would be considered high in saturated fat, salt and/or sugar**

Store	Number of products	Proportion with health claims on HFSS snacks
Subway	6	83%
Asda	34	82%
Shell	65	80%
Sainsbury's	37	78%
Tesco	74	74%
Boots	102	74%
Morrisons	20	65%
Co-op	29	55%

# DISCUSSION

Meal deal promotions are a convenient and cost-effective meal choice for many, but they should also be good for health. As this report shows, many high street stores offer little in the way of healthier options, which begs the question; how can consumers make healthier choices when they are limited by the options available to them?

No store stood out as leaders in providing healthier snack options in meal deal promotions. Sainsbury's ranked more favourably, offering a higher proportion of non-HFSS snacks with a greater overall compliance to the salt reduction targets compared to other stores. In contrast, Subway scored among the lowest for their meal deal offering, with fewer snacks complying with the maximum salt targets, and a higher proportion of HFSS snacks being offered in their meal deal promotions (Table 5).

Improvements are needed across the board if we are to make the healthier choice the easiest option for all.

**Table 5. Overall healthfulness of snacks on promotional meal deals across stores**

Store	Percentage compliance to maximum salt targets	Proportion of HFSS snacks	Proportion with health claims on HFSS snacks
Sainsbury's	19%	66%	78%
Morrisons	46%	63%	65%
Tesco	29%	71%	74%
Boots	31%	75%	74%
Co-op	33%	81%	55%
Shell	25%	76%	80%
Subway	24%	82%	83%
Asda	24%	82%	82%

The snacks included in meal deal promotions are a mixture of branded and own label products, and therefore it should be noted that stores are limited in their ability to reformulate foods produced outside of their own business. Food companies can however play a valuable role in providing healthier options, and do have the power to increase the number of fruits and vegetables and non-HFSS snacks which also comply with the salt reduction targets, in their promotions. Stores should look to evaluate this and increase the number of healthier (non-HFSS) snacks in their meal deal offer.

**Sheena Bhageerutty, Assistant Nutritionist at Action on Salt**



*“Without doubt, meal deals are hugely popular especially amongst the nation’s workforce looking for a convenient and ‘value for money’ lunch. Yet unbeknown to many consumers, these meal combos and snacks are often exceedingly high in salt which means an adult can consume their maximum daily recommended salt intake in just one meal without even knowing it. Rather than trying to ‘upsell’ us on salt, saturated fat and sugar, CEOs of food retailers must act more responsibly by setting strict internal standards including only healthier snack options as part of the ‘deal’.”*

**Sonia Pombo, Campaign Manager for Action on Salt**



*“Despite the overwhelming impact on health, many companies appear to have forgotten that salt is a killer. These findings are well and truly shocking, especially given the vast amount of people that purchase these meal deals on a regular basis. In order to shift our food choices to healthier products, we need food companies to provide us with better, healthier and more affordable options. Now is the time for the food industry to act and improve the nutritional quality of the foods they sell, and if they can’t do it voluntarily, then the Government must step in and legislate, for the benefit of our health.”*

**Graham MacGregor, Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine at Queen Mary University of London, and Chairman of Action on Salt**



*“Reducing salt is the most cost-effective measure for lowering blood pressure and reducing the number of people suffering and dying from strokes, heart disease and life changing disabilities associated with this – all of which is completely avoidable. Given the fact that food companies have the very simple option to reformulate with less salt and help prevent the many thousands of people who currently die unnecessarily, it’s remarkable that very few companies choose this option. This is why the Government must enforce its comprehensive salt reduction targets without delay.”*

# ENGAGEMENT WITH INDUSTRY

We contacted all businesses included in this survey which provide meal deal promotions. We asked them to comment on their meal deal offering, along with official commitments to salt reduction.

## Sainsbury's

Our brand commitment 'Helping Everyone Eat Better' aims to make healthy and delicious food accessible for everyone, in line with the government's Eat Well Guide.

Our priority and our strategy is focused on increasing healthy and better for you sales by 2025/26. We are publicly disclosing progress against this target, the criteria for which includes a focus on PHE's reformulation targets, including those for salt.

Our teams are currently focused on driving material progress towards a clear ambition to help everyone eat better, as measured by increasing the healthiness of total sales. This impacts both our own-brand but also branded sales.

The PHE salt targets are included in our definitions of a healthier choice. As such, this means that all businesses working towards these targets will be rewarded for doing so in our health classifications, providing they meet other nutrition priorities too. These targets are built into our own-brand gate process, meaning we always review recipes against these and we also seek to develop products with due consideration for these. 84% of our own brand products already meet the 2024 PHE targets for salt.

We have also developed our own nutrition criteria based on external Government criteria for nutrition and published online. We have set targets to improve both healthy sales and better for you sales, ensuring we are seeing improvements right across the spectrum. For example:

- Smaller portions for treat items
- Rewarding brands for meeting reformulation targets
- Encouraging key nutrients such as calcium and fibre in foods that should be delivering them whilst also avoiding red traffic lights

Moreover, we appreciate that we need to focus beyond reformulation alone and consider sales impacts in the round, looking at multiple levers to help sustainably transition baskets towards healthier choices.



Helping our customers reduce their salt intake is very important to us and we are proud that 94% of our own brand products meet the 2024 salt targets, as we continue to work towards the targets and the introduction of HFSS in store regulations. Our Meal Deal snack options include a choice of healthier products and all our own brand products carry on pack nutritional information to help our customers with their choices.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## GOVERNMENT



- Mandate salt targets to ensure that all manufacturers and retailers meet the current and future targets. Failure to comply should be penalised.
- Push ahead with promotions restrictions and include all meal deal promotions.
- Develop consumer awareness campaigns to inform the public of the dangers of salt hidden within everyday food.

## INDUSTRY



- Prioritise salt reduction targets for improved public health.
- Develop standards for more responsible marketing – nutrition and health claims on products that are considered HFSS should be restricted so that the public are not misled into thinking a product is a healthy choice.
- Improve nutritional offering of products on promotional deals and increase the proportion of non-HFSS snacks in meal deals.

## CONSUMERS



- Read nutrition labels and opt for lower salt options. Use the FoodSwitch UK App [11] to help identify healthier alternatives so that you can swap to a lower salt choice.
- Demand action from your preferred retailer/food manufacturer and ask for less salt please!



# ABOUT US

Action on Salt is a group concerned with salt and its effects on health, supported by 22 expert scientific members. Action on Salt is successfully working to reach a consensus with the food industry and Government over the harmful effects of a high salt diet and bring about a reduction in the amount of salt in processed foods as well as salt added to cooking, and at the table.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- Nutrition students Vasilina Todorova from Queen Margaret University, Anson Hoi from UCL, for assistance with data collection
- Sheena Bhageerutty, Assistant Nutritionist Action on Salt, for data collection and analysis
- Sonia Pombo, Campaign Manager Action on Salt, for data analysis and preparation of report

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# APPENDIX I

Overall (maximum) salt target compliance of snacks included in all meal deals

Category	Salt Target	Number of Products	Average Salt g/100g (range)	% Compliance to Max Target
1. Meat products	1.3.2 – Cooked sausages	1	1.30	100%
	1.4.1 – Pork pies and sausage rolls	6	0.90 (0.7-1.09)	83%
	1.4.2 – Cornish/meat-based pasties	1	1.05	0%
	1.4.3 – Other meat-based pastry	2	0.81 (0.76-0.86)	0%
	1.5.2 – Cooked uncured meat reformed whole muscle	2	1.18 (1.05-1.3)	0%
	1.5.3 – Cooked uncured chopped reformed meat	9	1.37 (0.82-1.93)	44%
2. Bread products	2.3 – Morning goods yeast raised	4	0.72 (0.44-1.02)	75%
4. Cheese	4.1 – Cheddar cheese	2	1.80	100%
8. Ready meals & meal centres	8.2 – Ready meal sides and accompaniments	5	0.78 (0.55-1.08)	60%
11. Crisps and Snacks	11.1 – Standard potato crisps	29	1.23 (0.47-1.63)	72%
	11.2 – Extruded snacks	22	1.48 (0.94-2.1)	91%
	11.3 – Pelleted snacks	18	2.04 (1.0-3.07)	94%
	11.4 – Salt and vinegar products	17	1.95 (0.91-2.83)	82%
	11.5 – Savoury popcorn	4	1.37 (1.3-1.47)	75%
	11.6 – Sweet popcorn	2	0.73 (0.68 - 0.8)	50%
	11.7 – Flavoured nuts	13	1.20 (0.54-2.33)	54%
12. Cakes and Pastries	12.1 - Cakes	33	0.54 (0.06-0.98)	61%
	12.3 - Pastries	1	0.22	100%
16. Biscuits	16.1 – Sweet biscuits	19	0.68 (0.02-1.2)	68%
	16.2 – Savoury biscuits	3	2.40 (2-2.6)	0%
22. Scotch eggs	22.1 – Scotch Eggs	3	0.75 (0.68-0.8)	67%
Out of Home Potato Products	1.2 – Seasoned chips	1	1.30	100%
Out of Home Battered/breaded chicken	3.2 – 200-400kcal	1	1.30	100%

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<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/great-britain-nutrition-and-health-claims-nhc-register>
- [11] FoodSwitch is a free smartphone app which allows you to scan the barcodes of food and drink products and instantly see whether they are high, medium or low in fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt. It also searches the database for similar but healthier alternative products, making it easier to switch to healthier food choices. For more information visit <http://www.foodswitch.co.uk>