

Reducing childhood obesity: The role of supermarkets

Debate Briefing: Westminster Hall Debate, 18 March 2020, 11am

The Obesity Health Alliance is a coalition of over 40 health organisations working together to help all children be a healthy weight.

What is the problem?

- Children's health is being affected by high levels of obesity. One in five children have a weight classified as overweight or obese when they start primary school. This rises to more than one in three by the time they leave primary school. Children from deprived backgrounds are more likely to have obesity.¹
- Severe obesity among 10 to 11-year-olds in England has reached its highest level yet at 4.2%.¹ That is equivalent to more than one child in every year 6 classroom.
- Children with obesity are more likely to become adults with obesity, increasing their risk of developing Type 2 diabetes, cancer, heart and liver disease plus associated mental health problems.
- The annual cost of overweight and obesity-related-ill-health to the NHS is £6.1 billion².

With strong leadership and impactful, evidence-based policy measures we can help ensure all children live healthier lives.

The role of supermarkets

Supermarkets can play a key role in helping families to be healthier by putting the spotlight on healthy, rather than high fat, sugar and salt foods in their stores and reformulating their own products to reduce sugar and overall calories.

1. Promotions

- Research shows that multi-buy price promotions (e.g. buy-one-get-one-free) do not help save money in the long-term, because consumers buy more products than they had planned to. This increase in purchasing does not lead to the consumer buying less during subsequent shopping trips.³
- Price promotions can increase the total amount of household food and drink purchased by around 20% – these are purchases that people would not make if the price promotions did not exist.⁴
- Research by Cancer Research UK found that people who buy a high proportion of their food on promotion buy significantly more unhealthy food and drink and much less fruit and vegetables, than people who buy little on promotion. The research also found that, contrary to some claims that low income families will suffer if food is not promoted, higher income families purchase the most on promotion as a proportion of their overall basket.⁵
- Where supermarkets place products in their stores has an impact on how likely we are to buy them.⁶ For example, end-of-aisle displays can increase sales of carbonated drinks by over 50%.⁷ In a 2018 survey by the Obesity Health Alliance, 43% of all food and drink products located in prominent areas, such as store entrances, checkout areas, aisle ends or free-standing display units (FSDUs) were for sugary foods and drinks.⁸ Less than 1% of food and drink products promoted in high profile locations were fruit or vegetables.

What steps can the Government take?

- **We want to see restrictions on multi-buy price promotions (e.g. buy-one-get-one free) and place-based promotions (e.g. at check outs and shop entrances) of unhealthy food and drinks and supermarkets encouraged to steer shoppers to healthy foods. The Government should publish next steps following their 2019 consultation on restricting the promotion of unhealthy foods.**
2. Reformulation
- Supermarkets can lead the way when it comes to reformulating their products to make them healthier. One large supermarket reduced the sugar across all their own brand drinks so they would not be subject to the soft drinks industry levy in 2018.⁹
 - However, latest data from Public Health England’s sugar reduction programme showed that supermarkets have not been as successful in reducing sugar in food. Since 2015, total sugar in retailer own brand and manufacturer branded products has fallen by just 2.9%.¹⁰
 - Retailers have achieved less sugar reduction in their own brand products than manufacturers. Retailers have decreased sugar by 1.5% (measured by total sugar per 100g) compared to 3.3% by manufacturers.¹⁰
 - The data show some increases in sugar in some product categories by some supermarkets:¹⁰
 - **Sainsbury’s:** sugar in morning goods increased by 10% (measured by sales weighted average, total sugar per 100g)
 - **Waitrose:** sugar in chocolate spreads increased by 13% (measured by sales weighted average, total sugar per 100g)
 - **VM Morrison Supermarkets:** sugar in sweet confectionery increased by 8% (measured by sales weighted average, total sugar per 100g)

What steps can the Government take?

- **The Government should commit to introducing fiscal measures for supermarkets and other food companies to incentivise them to meet sugar reduction targets.**

Public support:

- 76% of people agree that multi-buy offers encourage people to buy unhealthy food. Introducing restrictions on multi-buy promotions of high calorie food is supported by 59% of people.¹¹
- 76% of the public support supermarkets placing healthier products at the end of aisles and at checkouts.¹¹

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¹ NHS Digital (2019). National Child Measurement Programme, England 2018/19 School Year.

² Public Health England (2017). Health matters: obesity and the food environment.

³ Martin L, Bauld L and Angus K. (2017). Rapid evidence review: The impact of promotions on high fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) food and drink on consumer purchasing and consumption behaviour and the effectiveness of retail environment interventions. Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland.

⁴ Public Health England (2015). Sugar Reduction: The evidence for action - Annexe 4: An analysis of the role of price promotions on the household purchases of food and drinks high in sugar. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sugar-reduction-from-evidence-into-action>

⁵ Cancer Research UK analysis.

⁶ Wilson A, Buckley E, Buckley J and Bogomolva S. (2016). Nudging healthier food and beverage choices through salience and priming: Evidence from a systematic review. Food Quality and Preference. 51:47–64.

⁷ Nakamura et al. (2014). Sales impact of displaying alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages in end-of-aisle locations: An observational study. Social Science & Medicine.

⁸ Obesity Health Alliance (2018). Out of Place – the extent of unhealthy food promotions in supermarkets.

⁹ <https://www.tescopl.com/blog/sugar-tax-levy-soft-drinks-tesco/>

¹⁰ PHE (2019). Sugar reduction: Report on progress between 2015 and 2018.

¹¹ 3rd April 2018. Prepared by YouGov plc on behalf of Cancer Research UK