

Briefing: How are COVID-19 measures affecting the food environment?

The Obesity Health Alliance commissioned polling from Savanta ComRes¹ to understand more about the potential effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and public health measures to manage the situation, on the food environment and what people are eating.

Summary of findings

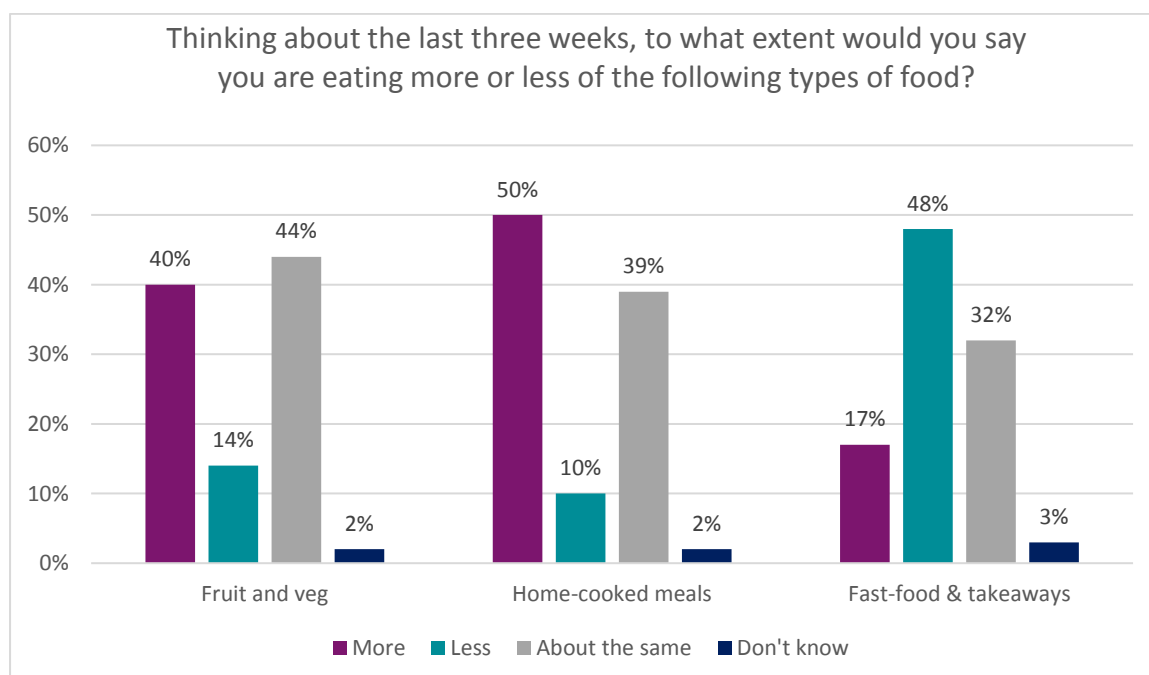
Younger people (aged 18-24) are more likely to report changes in what they are eating such as eating more or less of certain types of food. The good news is that there is a rise in people of all ages and backgrounds eating fruit and vegetables and cooking from scratch. However it's worrying that around one in seven people are reporting eating less fruit and vegetables. A large proportion of people (48%) report that they are eating less fast food and takeaways, which is likely to be beneficial for health, as takeaways are typically high in calories, fat and salt.² However, people (particularly young people) are reporting eating more discretionary foods, including confectionery, cakes and biscuits and crisps.

People haven't noticed any particular changes in food advertising (apart from younger people who report seeing slightly more food advertising online). There is a change in people's perceptions of supermarket promotions with 39% of people reporting seeing fewer multi-buy promotions on food in shops.

Supermarkets and their workers are doing a fantastic job of suppling food to local communities during these challenging times. The majority of people (62%) agree that supermarkets have a key role to play in helping people be healthy at the moment. 50% agree supermarkets should focus their promotions on foods that help us be healthier.

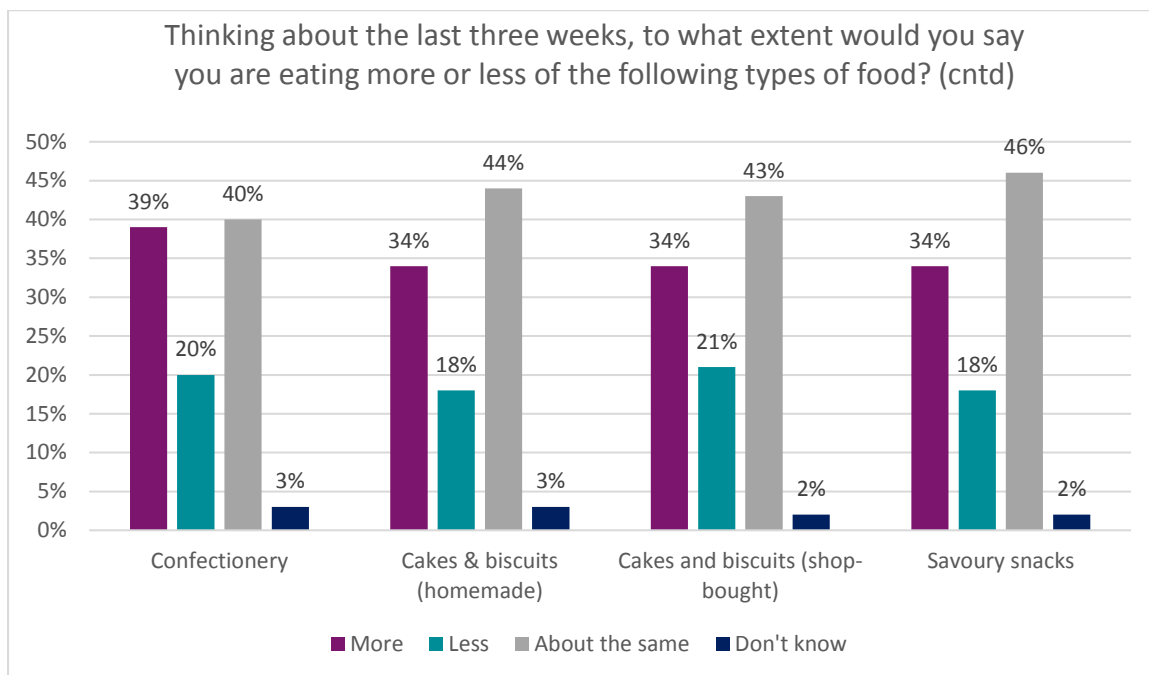
We are calling on supermarkets to use promotions only on food that helps us be healthy during this time.

What types of food are we eating more or less of?



¹ Savanta ComRes interviewed 2,025 UK adults (18+) online from the 17th April to 20th April 2020. Data were weighted to be demographically representative of English adults by gender, age, region and social grade.

² Jaworowska A, et al. (2014) Nutritional composition of takeaway food in the UK, *Nutrition & Food Science*, 44(5):414.



Fruit and vegetables (including tinned and frozen)

- Overall 40% say they are eating more, while 14% say they are eating less.
- 48% of 18-24 year olds are eating more, compared to 31% of 45-54 year olds.
- A lower proportion of people from more deprived backgrounds report eating more compared to those in more affluent groups – 36% and 43% respectively.

Cakes and biscuits (shop bought)

- Overall 34% say they are eating more, while 21% say they are eating less.
- 48% of 18-24 year olds say they are eating more cakes and biscuits.
- Those from less deprived backgrounds are slightly more likely to report eating more cakes and biscuits (37% vs 30%).

Cakes and biscuits (homemade)

- Overall 34% say they are eating more, while 18% say they are eating less.
- 44% of 18-24 year olds say they are eating more cakes and biscuits.
- Those from less deprived backgrounds are slightly more likely to report eating more cakes and biscuits (39% vs 29%).

Sweets and confectionery

- Overall 39% say they are eating more, while 20% say they are eating less.
- 51% of 18-24 year olds say they are eating more confectionery.
- Those from less deprived backgrounds are slightly more likely to report eating more (41% vs 35%).

Savoury snacks (crisps/ popcorn etc)

- Overall 34% say they are eating more, while 18% say they are eating less.
- 49% of 18-24 year olds say they are eating more savoury snacks.
- Those from less deprived backgrounds are slightly more likely to report eating more (38% vs 30%)

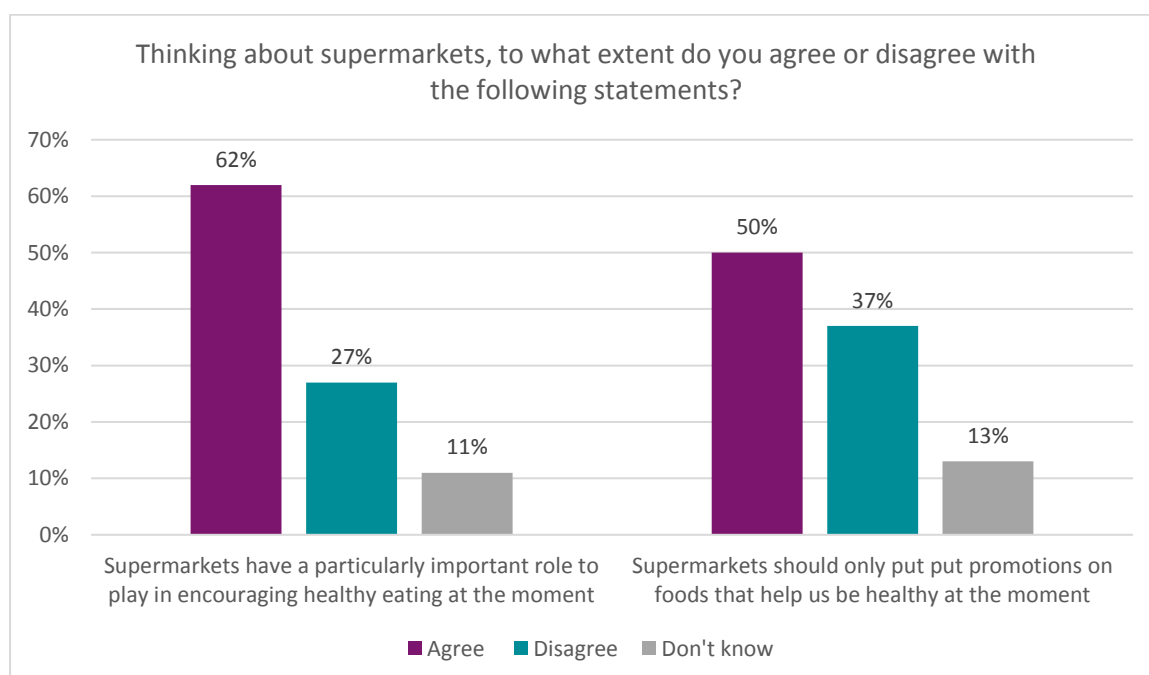
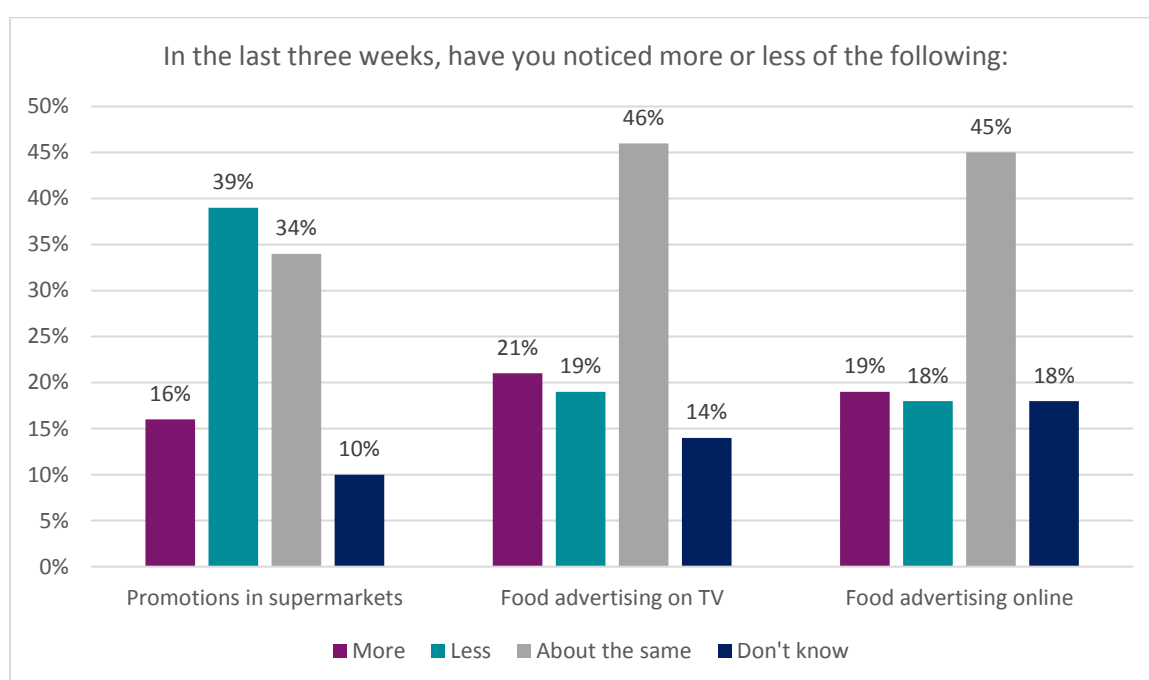
Fast-food/ takeaway food

- Overall 17% say they are eating more, while 48% say they are eating less.
- Younger people aged 18-24 are much more likely to eating more fast-food/ takeaway food compared to older people aged 65 plus (34% vs 4% respectively).
- There is significant regional variation with 28% of Londoners eating more, compared to just 13% in the North-West

Meals prepared from scratch

- Overall 50% say they are eating more, while 10% say they are eating less.
- All age groups consistently report eating more home-cooked meals
- Those from less deprived backgrounds are slightly more likely to report eating more (55% vs 43%)

Perceptions of the food marketing environment



Promotions on food in supermarkets (such as buy-one-get-one-free)

- Overall 39% say they have seen less, compared to 14% who say they have noticed more.
- Older people are more likely to notice less, 46% of 55-64 year olds say this compared to 33% of 18-24s.

Food advertising on TV

- Overall 21% say they have seen more, compared to 19% who say they have seen less, with almost half reporting they have not noticed a difference.

Food advertising online

- Overall 19% say they have seen more, compared to 18% who say they have seen less, with almost half reporting they have not noticed a difference.
- Younger people aged 18-24 are more likely to report seeing more advertising online (30%)

Supermarkets have an important role to play in encouraging healthy eating at the moment

- Overall 62% of people agree with the statement, compared to 27% who disagree.
- This rises to 71% in those aged 55-64.

Supermarkets should only put promotions (such as 'buy one get one free' or placing foods at checkouts) on foods that help us be healthy at the moment

- Overall 50% of people agree with the statement, compared to 37% who disagree.

Implications for policy

While this survey is just a brief snapshot into people's perceptions of the types of food they are eating, it signals that the health protection measures, such as social distancing and self-isolation, are having an effect on consumption, particularly on young people. While it's positive that people report eating more fruit and vegetables and fewer takeaways, there is also higher consumption of confectionery, biscuits and cakes and savoury snacks – all of which are typically high in fat, sugar and salt.

Marketing of food is also changing in this period, with people noticing fewer promotions and advertising across TV and online. It's important to note that this data was collected in the early part of April, in the first weeks of quarantine, and anecdotal evidence suggests that brands are now starting to shift and re-position their advertising.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it's important for people to be as healthy as possible. Good nutrition and being physically active are important to maintain a strong immune system.

Supermarkets and their workers are doing a fantastic job of supplying food to local communities during these challenging times and they have demonstrated their agility in changing their practice to meet our needs. The evidence is clear that retail promotions, including where food is positioned in store, and multi-buy promotions (such as buy-one-get-one free) influence our food purchases and how much we buy. In 2018 the Government announced plans to restrict the promotion of unhealthy food and drinks in supermarkets and held a consultation on options.

With regulatory action unlikely in the current public health crisis, we are calling on supermarkets and food retailers to do the following:

- Ensure only food and drink that is low in fat, sugar and salt is promoted in key locations (such as entrances, aisle ends and checkouts) and is subject to multi-buy promotions.
- Use promotions to drive people towards foods that encourage us to be healthy, including fruit and vegetables of all kinds.

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