

Recommendations 2a and 2c: Breaking the junk food cycle by regulating advertising and multibuy offers on food

SUMMARY

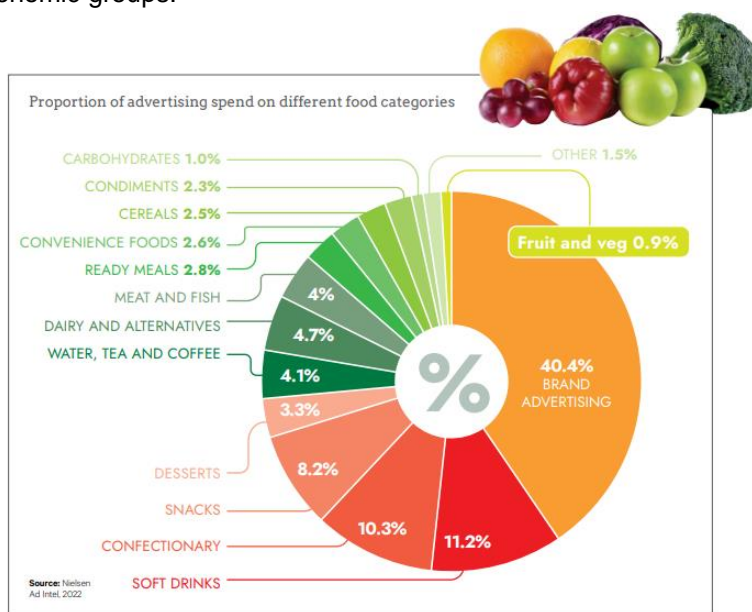
- Urgent action is needed to break the junk food cycle, as overconsumption adversely affects health, strains the NHS, reduces economic productivity, and excludes people from the workforce.
- Despite acknowledging the impact of advertising and multibuy offers on dietary patterns, especially in children, the UK Government has delayed implementing restrictions on unhealthy food advertisements on TV and online, and volume promotion restrictions on HFSS food until October 2025.
- Outdoor advertising of junk food remains a loophole in current regulations, highlighting the need for comprehensive and timely policy actions.

Hidden Costs of the Junk Food Cycle on Health and Society

- The junk food cycle is characterised by pervasive unhealthy foods, heavily marketed and appealing due to people's predilection for calorie-dense foods.
- The most recent data from the National Child Measurement Programme indicates that among children at Reception age, 21.4% have overweight or obesity, while this figure rises to 36.6% among Year 6 students. Notably, children in the most deprived groups are twice as likely to have obesity in comparison to their least deprived peers.
- According to The Food Foundation data, [two thirds](#) (66%) of children consume excessive amounts of salt, and 95% exceed sugar intake recommendations.
- This overconsumption of sugary foods and drinks, can lead to dental decay with 1 in 4 (23%) children under 5 in England experiencing [dental decay](#), while in Wales, the figure is 36%, and in Scotland, it stands at 27%. Furthermore, dental decay is now the top reason for [hospital admissions](#) among young children.
- The Food Foundation's [Broken Plate 2023](#) report tells a stark story: healthy and sustainable foods are seldom the most affordable, accessible, or prominently marketed options. Policies are needed to change this; it is unrealistic to expect the junk food cycle to be broken solely through individual willpower.

Exposure of Children to Advertising of Less Healthy Foods

- According to [Broken Plate 2023](#) investment in advertising for fruits and veg is negligible (0.9% of total advertising spend on food and drink) in comparison to spend on products such as soft drinks, confectionary, snacks and desserts (33% of total advertising spend on food and drink).
- All forms of advertising and marketing influence food preference and purchasing behaviours in both children and adults. Studies show that children are especially vulnerable to such marketing techniques leading to an increased consumption of unhealthy foods.
- People from lower socioeconomic groups are more [likely to be exposed](#) to such advertising compared to those from higher socio-economic groups.



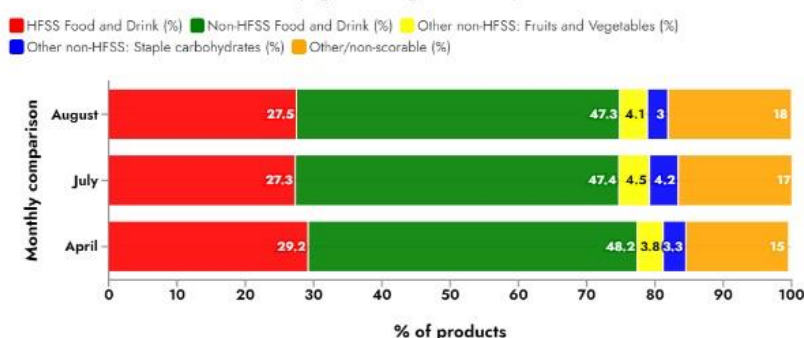
Delayed Restrictions for TV and Online Advertising of Unhealthy Foods

- The UK Government acknowledged the harmful influence of advertising on health in their 2020 Obesity Strategy and subsequently passed [legislation](#) to restrict the advertising of HFSS (high fat, salt and sugar) food and drinks online and on TV before 9pm. Unfortunately, they have since delayed the implementation of these urgently needed policies until October 2025.
- Children in the UK are exposed to [15 billion](#) online junk food adverts annually (nearly 500 impressions per second), and [3.6 billion](#) TV adverts per year.
- [Research](#) indicates that implementing restrictions on unhealthy food advertisements on TV could prevent 120,000 cases of overweight and obesity among children aged 5-17 years. Additionally, it would result in healthcare cost savings of £7.4 billion over the lifetime of today's children.

Promotions that Undermine Health

- The retail promotional environment often diverges from government healthy eating guidelines, posing challenges for families to make healthier choices when shopping. Approximately [40% of all expenditure](#) on food and drinks consumed at home is attributed to foods on promotion. The Food Foundation's [data](#) found that over a quarter (27.5%) of multibuy offers were on HFSS foods, while deals on fruits and vegetables constitute less than 5% of the total.

The proportion of multibuy offers on different types of food and drink (April -August 2023)



HFSS: High in Fat, Salt and Sugar (NPM score =>4 Food and n=>1 Drink)



- Evidence indicates that while promotions make products cheaper, they also encourage people to buy more of the promoted category than expected. [Government figures](#) reveal that, on average, multibuy offers increase the amount purchased by 22%.
- [Volume promotion restrictions \(e.g. buy one, get one free deals\)](#) on HFSS products were enacted into law in 2021, alongside restrictions on the location of in store promotions. While the location-based promotions came into force in October 2022, the implementation of volume promotion restrictions has been delayed until 2025. The Government's [impact assessment](#) for this measure states that expected direct benefits are equivalent to £2,390m over the 25-year assessment period. Social care benefits would total £212m, NHS cost savings are projected at £180m, and a reduction in premature mortality is expected to contribute an additional £283m of economic output.
- Several [retailers are supportive](#) of regulation for banning multi-buys on junk food and have chosen to apply these restrictions voluntarily. However, government regulation to ensure a level playing field are necessary.

The Challenge of Outdoor Junk Food Advertising

- Outdoor advertising remains a loophole in current regulations. [Research](#) focused on bus shelter ads in South Teesside revealed that nearly half of them (48.9%) were promoting food and drinks, with 35.1% falling into the 'less healthy' category based on the UK Nutrient Profiling Model.
- In 2019, the [Mayor of London](#) took a groundbreaking step by banning junk food adverts across all TFL network regions. Studies conducted by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and the University of Sheffield demonstrated that this policy has led to a [1000-calorie reduction](#) in energy from unhealthy purchases in consumer's weekly grocery shopping. Furthermore, the measure has prevented almost [100,000 obesity cases](#) and is expected to save the NHS over [£200 million](#) over the lifetime of the current population.

Advertising is also an opportunity to promote healthy foods

- Acknowledging the power that advertising has in shaping food preferences. The government should invest in promoting healthy and sustainable foods. Particularly, promoting options like fruit, veg and pulses.
- “[Eat Them to Defeat Them](#)” is a perfect example of a big bold advertising idea to increase healthy foods consumption among children. In 2018, ITV and Veg Power joined forces to develop a strategy to encourage kids eating more veg.
- [Today](#), 51% of families in the UK are familiar with this ad. Among those families, parents report that 45% of the kids and 31% of parents themselves are eating more veg as a direct result of the advert. That equates to 1.36 million children eating more veg from the 2023 TV advertising campaign.

What change do we want to see?

To safeguard the current and future health of our children through food policy in the UK, we are calling for government to press forward with the delayed restrictions on advertising unhealthy food on TV and online and volume promotion restrictions on HFSS foods. In addition, act to reduce unhealthy food and drink advertising in outdoor areas and invest in advertising for healthy and sustainable foods.

These measures not only have the potential to be effective in influencing individual choices but can also play a pivotal role in realising the government's ambition to halve childhood obesity by 2030. Additionally, they compel manufacturers to reformulate HFSS products, encourage the expansion of product portfolios to include healthier options, and motivate companies to allocate resources to boost the sales of nutritious foods.

As the UK approaches a General Election, The Food Foundation is urging all candidates and political parties to recognise the importance of improving the food system for achieving many societal goals. The Food Foundation's manifesto 'Nourishing the Nation' presents a range of policy priorities aimed at transforming the current food system, reshaping the nation's well-being and future.

You can find our Nourishing the Nation manifesto [here](#).

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