

# Recommendations 2a and 2c: Breaking the junk food cycle by only allowing healthier foods to be advertised and promoted

## SUMMARY

- Urgent action is needed to break the junk food cycle, as overconsumption of junk food 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 less healthy food until October 2025.
- Outdoor advertising of junk food remains a loophole in current regulations, highlighting the need for comprehensive and timely policy actions.

## What is the Junk Food Cycle?

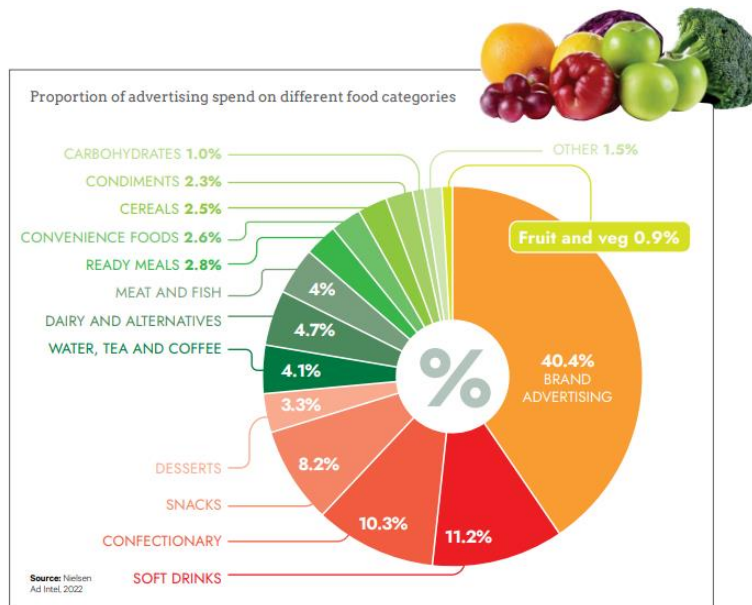
The **junk food cycle** aims to explain the rapid rise in food-related ill-health in recent decades. Many scientists studying human evolution and nutrition have discussed the idea that humans have a natural predilection for calorie-dense foods. This predisposition leads food companies to promote these foods within their portfolio, resulting in people consuming more of them and expanding the market. This, in turn, leads to more investment, and the cycle continues.

## The Hidden Costs of the Junk Food Cycle to our Health

- 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.
- According to data from the [Children's Future Food Inquiry report](#), two thirds (66%) of children consume excessive amounts of salt, and 95% exceed sugar intake recommendations.
- Data from the National Child Measurement Programme (2023) indicates that among children at Reception age, 21.4% have overweight or obesity, while this figure rises to 36.6% among Year 6 students.
- Children in the most deprived groups are twice as likely to have obesity compared to their least deprived peers.
- 1 in 4 (23%) children under 5 in England experience [dental decay](#). [In Scotland it is 27% and in Wales it is 36%](#). Dental decay is now the top reason for [hospital admissions](#) among young children.

## The Impact of Advertising on Public Health

- 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.
- According to [Broken Plate 2023](#), investment in advertising for fruits and veg is negligible (1% of total advertising spend on food and drink) in comparison to spend on products such as soft drinks, confectionery, snacks and desserts (33% of total advertising spend on food and drink).

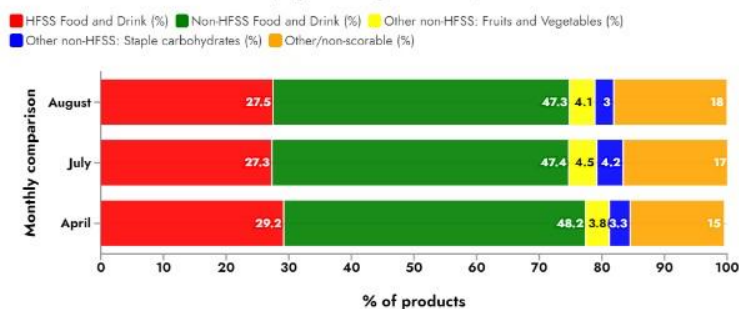


- Children in the UK are exposed to [15 billion](#) online junk food adverts annually (nearly 500 impressions per second), and [3.6 billion](#) TV adverts per year.
- [Research](#) indicates that implementing restrictions on unhealthy food advertisements on TV could prevent 120,000 cases of overweight 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.
- People from lower socioeconomic groups are more [likely to be exposed](#) to advertising on less healthy foods compared to those from higher socio-economic groups.
- 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/or 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.

## Promotions that Undermine Health

- 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 unhealthy 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)



- While promotions make products cheaper, they also encourage people to buy more than expected. [Government figures](#) show, 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 is 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 (49%) were promoting food and drinks. Of those promoting food and drinks, 35% were classified as 'less healthy' according to the UK Nutrient Profiling Model.
- To date, fourteen local authorities have brought in Healthier Food Advertising Policies. This is in addition to the [Mayor of London](#), who first took a groundbreaking step by switching the spotlight from unhealthy food across the Transport For London (TfL) network.
- 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 could be 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, 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.
- The [most recent stats](#) show that in 2023, 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 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 less healthy food on TV and online and volume promotion restrictions on HFSS foods.**
- **Act to reduce unhealthy food and drink advertising in outdoor areas.**
- **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](#).

For further information please contact Joss MacDonald, Public Affairs Lead: [joss.macdonald@foodfoundation.org.uk](mailto:joss.macdonald@foodfoundation.org.uk)