



Meat-Free Alternatives

Action on Salt, October 2018

A surprising 70% of the world population is reducing how much meat they eat or stopping their meat consumption altogether¹. In the UK alone, 1.2 million adults and children are vegetarian, and 600,000 are vegan^{2,3}. As vegetarian, flexitarian and vegan diets become more popular, there has been a surge in the availability and variety of meat-free and meat alternative products.

Just last year, as a nation we ate an additional 200 million meat free dinners, increasing the sales of meat free products by £30 million. 50% of meat alternative sales over the past year have been 'meal centres' such as burgers and sausages, with products that mimic meat proving popular due to the familiar flavour and similar appearance to meat⁴. Alternatives like this are a good stepping-stone from a meat-based meal to a meat free meal. Food Manufacturer predicts that the meat alternative market will continue to grow by 8.4% between 2015 and 2020⁵.

Turning to a plant based diet has become easier since manufacturers, retailers and the out of home sector have embraced and provided more meat alternative products. The increase in plant-based diets corresponds to the increased awareness of animal welfare, environmental impacts and changing perceptions of 'healthy food' by consumers¹.

A recent study published in the journal Nature highlighted that a huge reduction in meat consumption is necessary to avoid the dangerous impact of further climate change⁶. Action on Salt believe that vegetarian, vegan and flexitarian diets should be encouraged, and the food industry should be applauded for increasing the availability and variety of meat free products.

However, in 2008, Action on Salt carried out a survey of the salt content of meat alternatives, revealing some

vegetarian burgers and sausages contained as much salt as three to four bags of crisps. The saltiest vegetarian sausage, Fry's Vegetarian Tradition Sausage, contained 2.8g salt per sausage and two sausages as part of a meal would contribute 5.6g of salt - almost the entire maximum recommended daily limit for adults of 6g⁷!

We are now investigating if meat-free options are lower in salt compared to a decade ago, and aim to determine if the perceived health halo of these products is masking high levels of salt.

METHODS

Action on Salt surveyed all meat free alternatives including both vegetarian and vegan products that would typically be eaten as part of a meal. Meat free sausages, burgers, mince, pieces and fillets, sliced meat, pies and bakes were included. Vegetarian and vegan ready meals were excluded.

Nutrition data for all available meat alternatives, totalling 157 products, were collected in September 2018 from product packaging in Aldi, Asda, Iceland, Lidl, Marks & Spencer, Morrison's, Sainsbury's, Tesco, The Cooperative and Waitrose.

In addition, nutrition data for all available beef burgers, totalling 37 products, were collected in September 2018 from product packaging in Asda, Sainsbury's and Tesco.

RESULTS

- **28% of products exceed their maximum salt reduction targets**
- **Vegetarian burgers saltier than real beef burgers**
- **A fifth of products had no colour-coded front of pack labelling**

Salt Reduction Targets

In 2016, Public Health England (PHE) assumed responsibility for salt reduction. However, since then there has been little action, with no progress report on the 2017 salt targets and no announcement of salt reduction plans for 2018 and beyond.

Unsurprisingly, we found that 28% of all meat free products surveyed are higher in salt than their maximum salt reduction targets which highlights the lack of commitment to salt reduction from the food industry, due to a complete lack of guidance and monitoring from Public Health England.

| Category | 2017 Maximum Salt Target | 2017 Average Salt Target |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Plain Meat Alternatives (including plain mince, pieces, fillets) | 0.63g of salt per 100g | N/A |
| Meat Free Products (all meat alternative products including sausages, burgers, bites, pies, sliced meats) | 1.25g of salt per 100g | 0.9g of salt per 100g |
| Meat Free Bacon | 1.88g of salt per 100g | N/A |

Table 1: 2017 Salt Reduction Targets for Meat Alternatives

Meat Free Burgers vs Beef Burgers

Many of us believe that meat free alternatives are the 'healthy' option, as they are typically lower in saturated fat than meat products. However, Action on Salt's survey of the salt content of beef burgers sold in Tesco, Asda and Sainsbury's found that their average salt per serving was 0.75g compared to 0.89g for vegetarian burgers, including bean burgers – more salt than a large portion of McDonald's fries!

Saltiest Culprits

The saltiest product included in the survey was **Tofurky's Deli Slices Hickory Smoked**, with 3.5g of salt per 100g, almost 3 times the salt content of the salt reduction target for meat-free ham (1.25g/100g). Additionally, **Tesco's Meat Free 8 Bacon Style Rashers** have 3.2g/100g, almost twice as high as the salt reduction target for meat-free bacon (1.88g/100g).

The majority of **Linda McCartney** and **Cauldron** products had more than 1g salt per serve, and of the 34 **Quorn** products included in the survey, 44% exceeded their maximum salt targets.

Lower Salt Products

Disappointingly, only three products included in the survey are low in salt with 0.3g salt or less per 100g. Two of these products are plain meat-free mince (**Quorn Mince** and **Tesco Meat Free Mince**) but the other product is **Goodlife's Spicy Veg Beanburgers** (0.29g/100g). This is encouraging – if **Goodlife** can create a low salt vegetarian burger then ALL companies can reduce salt levels in their meat-free burgers.

All **Asda** and **Sainsbury's** own brand products surveyed had 1g or less per serve, and no **Morrison's** own brand products exceed their maximum salt targets.

Category Comparisons

With each product survey, Action on Salt consistently find that there is a large variation in the salt content of products within the same product category. This clearly demonstrates that it is possible to make products with less salt and if some manufacturers can achieve this, then other companies should be aiming to follow suit and protect the health of their valued consumers.

Within the meat-free mince category, **Tesco's Meat Free Mince** had just 0.2g salt per 100g, which would give it a green front of pack label for salt. In comparison, **Naturli Plant Based Mince** has 1.2g/100g – 6 times more salt!

Similarly, **Quorn's Vegetarian Ham** has 0.9g salt per 100g but **Tofurky's Deli Slices Hickory Smoked** have a worrying 3.5g/100g, making this product saltier than seawater and 4 times saltier than Quorn's product.

Front of Pack Nutrition Labelling

A fifth (32 of 157) products included in the survey had no front of pack colour-coded labelling including **Linda McCartney's** entire product range.

Furthermore, around a fifth (18%) of products also had no portion sizes stated on pack, making it hard for consumers to judge how much of a product they should eat and gauge their daily salt intake.

CONCLUSION

Consumers are currently being misled into thinking they are eating healthier by turning to processed foods that are plant based and lower in fat, but which actually conceal high levels of salt. Manufacturers must take the initiative to reduce the salt in their products.

PHE must now prioritise salt reduction work. Every 1g reduction in salt intake prevents 7,000 deaths, 4,000 of which are premature, from strokes and heart disease and therefore it is vital that PHE take urgent action to prevent further unnecessary deaths.

Top Tips for Healthier Veggie Meals

Lower salt options do exist, so make sure you check the label for salt and use FoodSwitch to find healthier meat alternatives

Try making your own vegetarian or vegan burger with beans <http://www.actiononsalt.org.uk/less/recipes/mains/burger-vegetable/>

Try adding natural protein ingredients to meals such as lentils, beans, eggs, cheese or plain tofu instead of relying solely on processed vegetarian alternatives to meat

Choose accompaniments carefully – for example try to avoid salty cheeses, pickles and sauces with burgers, and choose lower salt sauces or gravy with sausages

REFERENCES

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About Us:

Action on Salt (formerly Consensus Action on Salt and Health) is a group concerned with salt and its effects on health, supported by 24 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.

Enquiries:

Mhairi Brown, ANutr

T: 0207 882 5941

E: mhairi.brown@qmul.ac.uk

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www.actiononsalt.org.uk

Have you tried the FoodSwitch App?

FoodSwitch UK allows you to scan the barcode of food and drink products and instantly see whether they are **high**, **medium** or **low** in fat, saturates, sugars and salt.



It also searches the database for similar but healthier alternative products, making it easier than ever to switch to healthier food choices.

There are 5 different filters to choose from, so whether you are looking to lower your blood pressure, reduce your saturated fat (saturates) and sugar intake, or cut back on your calories, **FoodSwitch UK** can help. Click here to find out more about how it works.

Use **FoodSwitch UK** to see what's in your shopping basket, and make better food choices when shopping for you and your family. **FoodSwitch UK** is available as a free, UK-only download from iTunes and Google Play.