

Salt content of vegan and plant-based meals served in the out of home sector



Do you realise just how much salt is hidden in the food you buy every day?



A truly shocking amount, actually. Food companies add salt to bread, cheese, processed meat, cakes, even breakfast cereal. Little wonder we have a huge salt-related health crisis hiding right in front of our noses.

SALT AWARENESS WEEK 9-15 MARCH 2020
#SaltAwarenessWeek actiononsalt.org.uk



Background

Salt

Excessive salt in the diet leads to high blood pressure, which affects more than 1 in 4 adults in England, equating to 12.5 million people in 2015¹. High blood pressure increases our risk of developing stroke and heart disease and played a significant role in the more than 42,000 premature deaths from stroke and heart disease that occurred in 2017². A high salt diet is also linked to osteoporosis, stomach cancer, kidney disease, and indirectly to obesity via soft drink consumption³.

Many people do not realise they have a high salt diet, as the majority of the salt comes from processed food bought in the supermarket, such as bread, cheese, meats and ready meals. This goes some way to explaining why our average salt intake in the UK is 8g per day, compared to the recommended limit of 6g⁴.

Policies to Help Lower Salt in the Diet

Salt Reduction Programme

The UK's world leading salt reduction programme, established in the mid-2000s and managed by the Food Standards Agency, was hugely successful, leading to 40% less salt in many popular food products, an overall reduction in population salt intakes and a fall in deaths from heart disease and stroke by 2011⁵. However, following changes in governments and a transfer of responsibility for the policy from the Food Standards Agency to the Department of Health, and again to Public Health England (PHE) in 2016, progress has slowed.

The food industry are currently encouraged to follow the latest set of salt reduction targets ('2017 targets'), which were originally expected to be achieved by 2017. PHE's progress report published in December 2018 assessed industry's focus, and found that within the retail sector, just over half (52%) of all the average salt reduction targets were met, with retailers making more progress than manufacturers (73% vs 37%). With regards to the out of home sector, 71% of products had salt levels at or below their maximum per serve target, although it is worth noting that salt content is typically higher in this sector⁶.

Out of Home targets

Salt targets for the out of home (OOH) sector do exist, but only for 11 categories of food, including pizza, sandwiches and pies. There are some clear categories of food currently lacking targets, including soups, salads, and no specific target for vegan or plant based meals, despite their growing popularity⁷. Furthermore, the OOH targets are much less ambitious than retail targets, with some meals being allowed up to 5g of salt in a single meal.

Nutrition Labelling

Since 2013, the UK has had a voluntary front of pack labelling scheme which combines front of pack colour coded labels (red - high, amber - medium and green – low), nutrition content per 100g and percentage reference intakes to highlight levels of calories, fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt⁸. The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), who manage the UK's voluntary policy, estimated that two thirds of food and drink products displayed FOPL in 2016, and more than 80% of people used FOPL⁹. Evidence suggests front of pack labelling used consistently across all food and drink, can

improve people's understanding of nutritional information and make healthier food choices¹⁰. However, no such policy exists for the OOH sector. Government proposed mandatory calorie labelling on menus in the OOH sector as part of chapter 2 of their Childhood Obesity Plan¹¹, but while this has been consulted on, no further action has been taken and reports suggest that the policy, if implemented, would be significantly watered down compared to the proposal put forward in the consultation¹².

Eating Outside the Home

Food we eat in the OOH sector, which includes cafes, restaurants, fast food outlets and takeaways, is increasingly commonplace in day to day life, with one in five meals eaten out¹³. Food available in the OOH sector tends to be higher in salt and calories compared to the food we make at home. This was highlighted in Action on Salt's 2018 Salt Awareness Week survey, which found that Chinese takeaway meals available from restaurants in London's China Town can contain more than 11g of salt per portion, far exceeding an adult's recommended daily limit¹⁴. Whilst many people might appreciate that their favourite takeaway is likely not healthy, they might be led to assume that a vegan or plant-based meal is the clear healthier choice.

Vegan and Plant-based

According to the Vegan Society, there has been a significant increase in those identifying as vegan in recent years, from 150,000 in 2014 to 600,000 in 2019 in the UK alone¹⁵. In 2018, the UK launched more vegan products than any other nation and Deliveroo reported that vegan orders quadrupled between 2017 and 2019¹⁷. There are many reasons people choose to become vegan and chief among them are animal welfare, health and environmental factors. In 2019, EAT Lancet published an in-depth scientific report showing that a more plant-based diet is the only viable option to tackle both poor nutrition and the disease it brings, at the same time as mitigating the environmental disaster that is our current food production system. Indeed, it is estimated that if the global population went vegan, greenhouse gas emissions would be reduced by two thirds, with significant healthcare savings and reduced climate damages of \$1.5 trillion (£1.1 trillion)¹⁶.

However, the salt content of both vegetarian and vegan products is rarely documented or considered, and is likely to be higher than we would assume. In October 2018, Action on Salt surveyed the salt content of more than 150 meat alternative products such as meat free burgers, sausages and mince, finding that meat free burgers had more salt per portion compared to beef burgers (0.89g per portion v 0.75g per portion)¹⁸.

It is possible that the 'health halo' of vegan products, due in part to their marketing and advertisement as healthy products, is masking a poor nutritional profile. Vegans and vegetarians deserve better options, as do those who choose vegan options believing them to be better for their health.

Salt Awareness Week 2020 Survey

Action on Salt aimed to determine the public's views towards vegan and plant-based food, and food available in the out of home sector in general, and assess the salt content of vegan and plant based meals at popular restaurants, fast food outlets and coffee shop chains across the UK.

Method

Public Opinion Survey

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Salt Awareness Week 2020 report

Action on Salt commissioned Censuswide to conduct an opinion survey in a nationally representative and random sample of 2,022 respondents aged 16+ in the UK between 15-17th January 2020. Censuswide abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles.

The following questions were included in the survey:

1. Do you find restaurant and takeaway meals too salty?
2. Are you concerned about how much salt is in your food when eating at a restaurant or takeaway?
3. Do you think restaurants, cafes and pubs etc should provide nutritional information on their menus?
4. If you buy vegan/plant based food, what are the main reasons for doing so?
5. How should chefs, pubs and restaurants reduce the amount of salt in food, if at all?
6. Would you support government taking action to ensure that the out of home sector reduces salt levels in their dishes and is transparent about the nutritional content of their meals on menus?

OOH Salt Content Survey

Data were collected by Action on Salt through online research (week commencing 24th February 2020) and updated on 4th March 2020. The data collected by Action on Salt include plant based or 'vegan friendly' options from different restaurants in the UK with available nutrition information.

In total, there are 27 restaurants and 18 fast food and coffee chains with nutritional information represented in the data. Data from 290 savoury main dishes we collected, including soups, salads, sandwiches and wraps (starters, sides sharers and desserts were not included); 162 from restaurant chains, and 128 from fast food and coffee shop chains. These are discussed separately as they offer a different meal experience and are therefore not entirely comparable.

Results

Public Opinion Survey

Our survey clearly shows that salt is an issue for consumers. The majority of respondents (74%) stated they **always or sometimes found restaurant and takeaway meals too salty**, with two thirds (68%) of those respondents being **concerned about the levels of salt**. There is also clear support for more information about what we eat outside the home, with more than three in four (77%) people supporting **nutritional information on menus**.

If you buy vegan or plant based food, what are your main reasons for doing so?

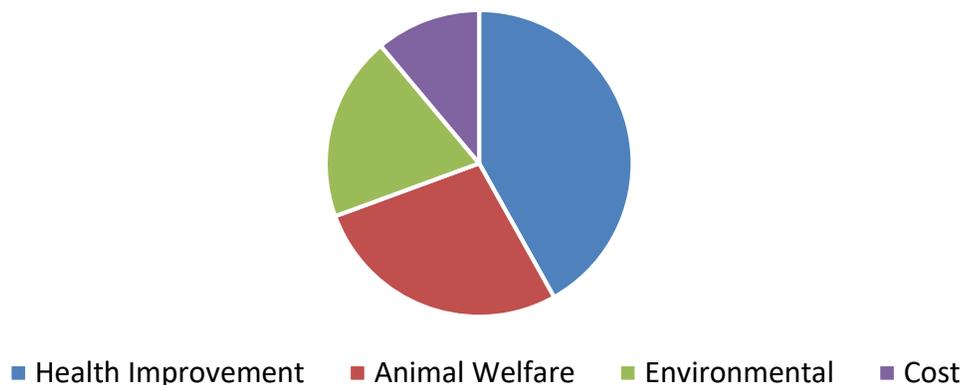


Chart 1: Representation of the leading responses to question 4

Surprisingly, **health improvement was the leading reason for buying vegan and plant based food**, ahead of animal welfare and environmental factors. This demonstrates that there is a perception in the public that any food or meal marketed as vegan or plant based is healthier than an equivalent non-vegan product.

How should chefs, pubs and restaurants reduce the amount of salt in food?

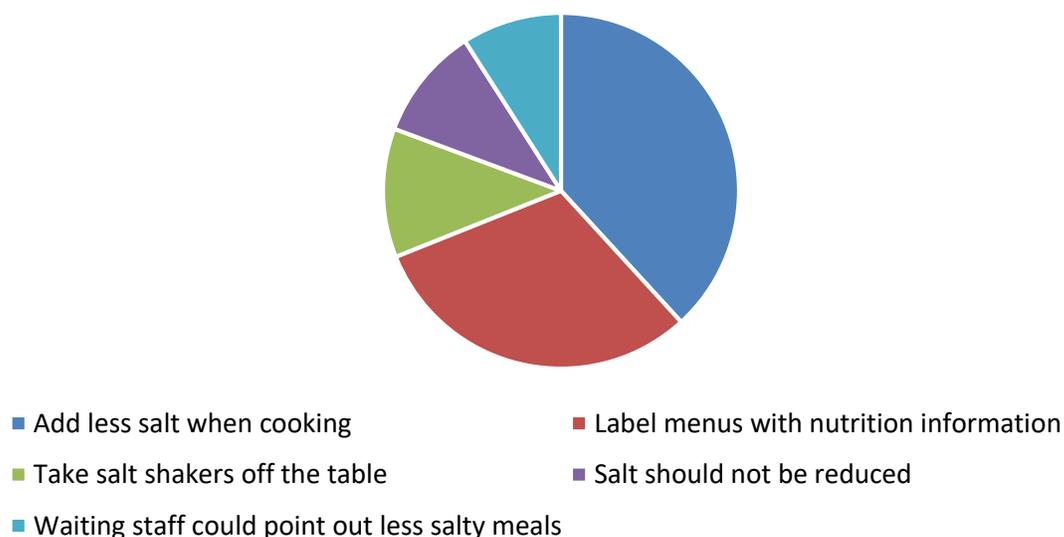


Chart 2: Representation of main responses to question 5

When it comes to salt reduction in the out of home sector, more than half of respondents believe responsibility lies with chefs, stating **chefs should add less salt when cooking**. Around half (48%) also feel restaurants and pubs should also take some responsibility and label menus with nutrition information.

When it comes to government's role in helping consumers to eat healthier, **72% of people support government taking action to reduce salt levels in meals** and to ensure that outlets in the out of home sector are **transparent about nutrition content of their meals**.

OOH Salt Content Survey



A staggering three out of five plant-based restaurant meals surveyed with nutrition information (96/151) contain 3g or more salt – that's half of an adult's maximum daily intake of salt. Worse still, 19 of these dishes provide 6g or more salt – that's an adult's ENTIRE maximum daily limit in just one meal!

Examples of Salty Meals

- **Papa John's Vegan American Hot Medium Pizza**, 9.28g salt - more salt than 7 McDonald's Hamburgers¹⁹
- **Loch Fyne Spiced Roasted Cauliflower & Squash Goan Curry** 8.65g salt – saltier than 19 anchovies²⁰
- **Bella Italia Vegan Cheese Pizza** 8.1g salt – saltier than 23 bags of ready salted crisps²¹
- **Chiquitos Vegarrito** 7.89g salt
- **Slug and Lettuce Louisiana Chick'n Vegan Meat-less Burger** 7.6g salt

If these restaurant chains were to display colour-coded nutrition information on their menus like packaged food in supermarkets, more than four out of five (127/151) plant-based meals would have a red label for high salt content (i.e. >1.8g salt in a meal)²².

Interestingly, the variation in salt content of similar meals served at different restaurants is surprising – with some restaurants offering dishes that have seven times more salt than their competitors, clearly demonstrating that these meals can easily be reformulated with much less salt.

Cuisine	Higher	Salt/portion (g)	Lower	Salt/portion (g)	Difference
Pizza	Papa John's Vegan American Hot (original base medium) - 8 slices	9.28	Prezzo Garlic Mushroom Regular	1.79	5.2 times more
Curry	Loch Fyne Spiced Roasted Cauliflower & Squash Goan Curry	8.65	Wagamama Yasai Nikko Curry + White Rice	1.13	7.7 times more
Tex Mex	Chiquito's Vegarrito	7.89	Toby Cavery Chilli Non Carne (served with rice)	2.30	3.4 times more
Burger	Slug and Lettuce Louisiana Chick'n Vegan Meat-less Burger served with topped nachos	7.60	Harvester The Beyond Bean Burger (with triple cooked chips)	3.40	2.2 times more
Pasta	Bella Italia Vegan Bolognese Spaghetti	6.80	ASK Vegan Fettuccine con Verdure	1.00	6.8 times more
Pie	Wetherspoons Mushroom & Vegetable Pie with sides	5.50	Brewer's Fayre Fake and Ale Pie with sides	2.70	2.0 times more

Table 1. Examples of similar restaurant dishes from different cuisines, with varying levels of salt

Fast Food & Coffee Chains Plant Based and Vegan Meals

A whopping two thirds of plant-based meals (82/128) available in fast food and coffee chains would get a red label for being high in salt (>1.8g salt per portion) – along with nearly two in five (29/128) meals containing 3g or more salt i.e. half of an adult's maximum daily intake of salt.

Examples of Salty meals

- **Wasabi Pumpkin Katsu Curry Yakisoba** 10.3g salt – saltier than 8 McDonald's Hamburgers
- **Wasabi Veg Tanmen Soup** 9.7g salt – saltier than 21 anchovy fillets
- **EAT 3 Bean, Smoked Chili and Tomato** 5g salt – saltier than 14 bags of ready salted crisps
- **Abokado THIS Vegan Katsu Curry** (with sauce) 4.6g salt
- **Cojean Vegetable Gyoza Miso Soup** 4.3g salt

Cuisine	Higher	Salt/portion (g)	Lower	Salt/portion (g)	Difference
Curry	Wasabi Pumpkin Katsu Curry Yakisoba (standard portion)	10.30	Leon Lentil Masala	2.20	4.7 times more
Noodles	Wasabi Sweet Chilli Tofu Yakisoba	8.70	Itsu Veggie'Gyoza Udon	2.79	3.1 times more
Sandwiches/Wraps	Crush Avocado, Red Pepper and Cashew Nut Tapenade Wrap	3.10	Caffe Nero Sweetcorn Fritter with Chutney and Coleslaw Flatbread	0.60	5.2 times more
Salads	Itsu No Meat Mondays	2.61	POD Tabbouleh	0.10	26.1 times more
Burger	KFC Vegan Burger	2.91	Leon Chipotle Avocado Burger	1.90	1.5 times more
Pastry	Gregg's Vegan Sausage Roll	1.90	Caffe Nero Vegan Vegetable Sausage Roll	1.20	1.6 times more

Table 2. Examples of similar fast food and coffee chain dishes, demonstrating varying levels of salt

Saturated Fat in Plant Based and Vegan Meals

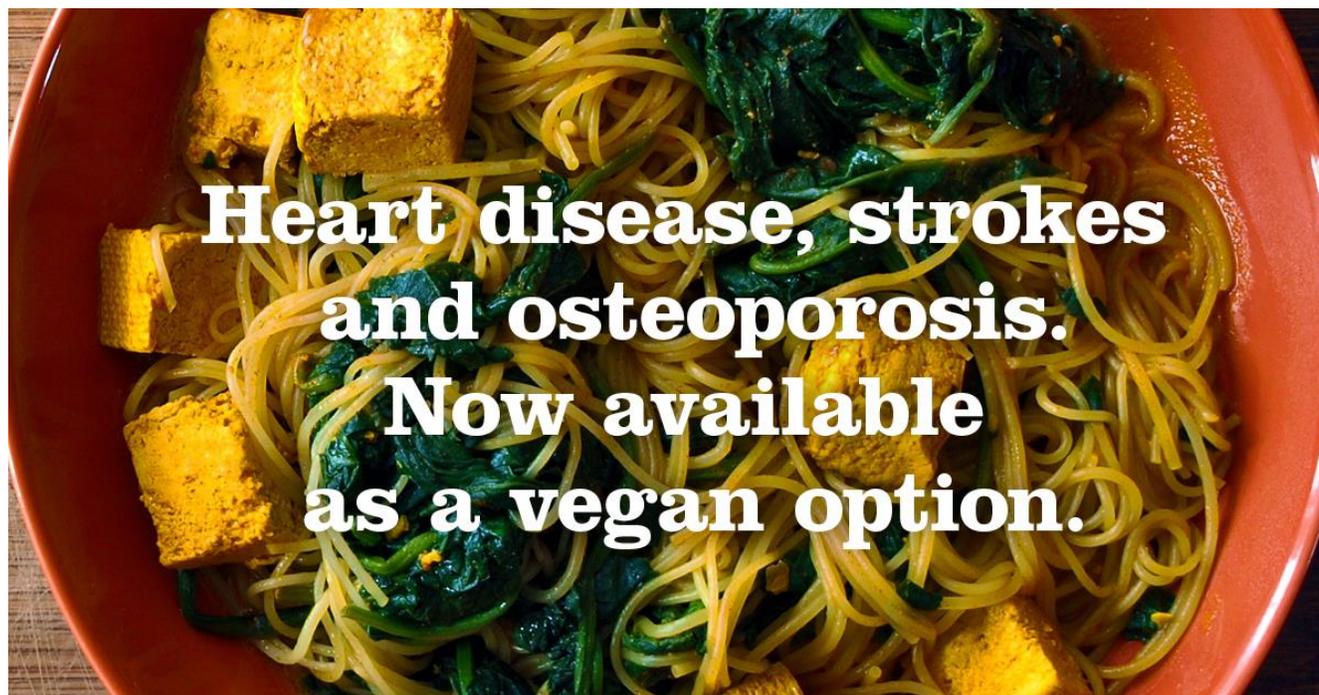
It's not just salty food being served up by UK restaurants, fast food and coffee chains – over half of all restaurant meals surveyed would qualify for a red label (>6g/portion) for **saturated fat**, and more than one in five dishes provide more than half of an adult's maximum daily intake for saturated fat²³. One of the worst offenders is **Harvester's The Purist Burger** (served with triple cooked chips), containing 54.2g saturated fat in a meal, nearly 3 times a woman's maximum daily intake!

Salt Targets

PHE's 2017 salt targets include targets for the eating out sector and are intended to guide salt reduction in the meals we eat in restaurants, cafes and fast food outlets⁷. However, of all the meals surveyed, only half (56%) have a salt reduction target in place, and of those, only 53 (32%) have failed, despite the high levels of salt reported in many of these dishes.

This clearly demonstrates that the 2017 targets are not comprehensive, ambitious or fit for purpose. The Government announced their commitment to reducing salt in their Prevention Green Paper last year, and are currently negotiating new targets for the food industry to achieve by 2023. The Secretary of State for Health Matt Hancock must now be brave and bring these out of home targets in line with the rest of the food industry, with clear consistent monitoring across the whole industry.

Conclusion



Our opinion survey clearly shows that the public perceive vegan and plant based options to be better for their health. Most people are worried about salt levels in food they eat outside the home, with the majority supporting more action from government to help them eat less salt and find healthier options.

Given that health improvement is the leading reason for choosing vegan and plant-based food, findings of our survey of the salt and saturated fat content of vegan meals in the out of home sector were concerning. The health halo of vegan food is masking high levels of salt. While it is right that vegans, vegetarians and flexitarians have more options when eating out, the food industry should not profit at the expense of health. Vegan and plant based options must be the healthier choice for the environment and the population.

Sonia Pombo, Campaign Manager for Action on Salt says: *“This survey highlights the lengths that some restaurants go to in producing unhealthy dishes, hidden under a vegan health halo, continuing to drown us in salt and saturated fat. Eating a more plant based diet can be beneficial for a number of reasons, but whether you are looking to eat less meat for animal welfare, sustainability or health reasons, it is important to know a ‘plant-based’ or ‘vegan’ label does not automatically qualify a product as healthy.”*

Zoe Davies, Nutritionist at Action on Salt explains: *“Much of the retail sector has made good progress by voluntarily displaying clear nutrition information on front of packaging to help shoppers find the healthier options, but the eating out sector have yet to be as transparent. We need to see clear nutritional information displayed both online and on menus, to make it easier for diners to make healthy choices.”*

Graham MacGregor, Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine at Queen Mary University of London and Chair of Action on Salt, adds: *“It is shocking that many in the out of home sector appear to be deliberately ignoring the voluntary salt reduction targets, in what many regard incorrectly as healthy food. The government must enforce stricter and more comprehensive salt reduction targets and create a fair and level playing field wherever you choose to eat.”*

“Salt is the leading cause of raised blood pressure which in turn is the major cause of strokes and heart disease. According to the Department of Health & Social Care, each one gram/day reduction in population salt intake, saves more than 4,000 premature deaths per year. Given this, it is immoral of any food company not to do their part, and the Secretary of State needs to act now.”

Action on Salt Recommendations

Government must take action to reduce levels of salt present in the meals sold in the out of home sector, and indeed in all foods, to help lower salt intake in the UK. This action would have public support but without strong government leadership, it is unlikely we would see necessary progress from all sectors of the food industry.

- Public Health England are currently consulting on new salt targets for 2023, but the Secretary of State for Health Matt Hancock must be brave and bring the out of home targets in line with the rest of the food industry, with clear consistent monitoring across the whole industry
- The leading sources of salt in the UK diet include bread and processed meat. Government must make salt targets mandatory for these categories to fully benefit public health
- The public must be aware of salt levels in their food and the impact this has on their health. Public Health England must amplify salt reduction messages in their Change4Life campaign and issue other materials to help raise awareness of salt

Although salt reduction is a shared responsibility, **the food industry** must ensure the products they sell are lower in salt. Our surveys consistently show a huge variation in the salt content of similar products so it is possible to reduce salt levels without reducing sales.

- Food companies across industry must ensure that all employees are aware of and engaged with PHE’s salt reduction programme, and that achieving targets is an accomplishment to be celebrated
- Salt reduction targets should be used in all new product development to ensure that moving forward, all products on the shelves or on menus are lower in salt
- To help consumers find the healthier option, industry must display nutrition information on packaging and, where possible, on menus. If nutrition information is available in the out of home sector, this should be provided to consumers along with their menus

- The out of home sector should remove salt shakers from tables – chefs add more than enough salt to food
- Foods high in salt, sugar and saturated fat should not be marketed to children, or be marketed as 'healthy'. Our survey highlights the huge levels of salt in vegan and plant-based food – any product high in salt could never be considered healthy

Individuals can also play a part in salt reduction:

- Look at nutrition labelling and compare products to choose better alternatives, and ask waiting staff to point out lower salt options on menus
- Write to your MP, food companies and supermarkets to ask for less salt in food and better labelling
- Don't add salt to food, gradually add less salt when cooking and use ingredients such as lemon, chilli and fresh herbs to add flavour in place of salt

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About us

Action on Salt is a group concerned with salt and its effects on health, supported by 24 expert scientific members. Action on Salt was set up in 1996 as a response to the refusal of the Chief Medical Officer to endorse the COMA recommendations to reduce salt intake, following the threat of withdrawal of funds by the food industry to the Conservative Party. This view was contrary to the current medical and scientific consensus and we aim to counter these claims with the wealth of scientific evidence, which clearly links high salt intake to ill health.

The current target is to reduce salt intake to an average of 6g a day for adults and even less for children, from the current average of 8g a day. This reduction will have a large impact on reducing strokes by approximately 22% and heart attacks by 16% saving 17,000 lives in the UK as well as other health benefits for the population.

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 the table. To date we have been successful with many supermarkets and food manufacturers choosing to adopt a policy of gradually reducing the salt content of their products, and a Government-financed campaign to raise awareness of the effects of salt on health.



FoodSwitch UK is a free app brought to you by Action on Salt, in collaboration with The George Institute for Global Health, to help you find out what's in the food you're eating, so you can make simple switches to healthier options. Simply scan the barcode of your regular brand to get colour-coded nutrition information and see a list of healthier alternatives. Download the app [here](#).

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