

The Salt Content of Children's Meals in the Restaurant Sector



July 2022

Summary

1. Consuming excess salt in childhood can increase risk of illness later in life.
2. Meals eaten outside the home tend to be bigger in portion size and higher in salt, sugar and saturated fat than food cooked at home.
3. Our survey of children's meals from 15 popular family-friendly restaurants confirms many meals are high in salt (41%) – some being more than a child's maximum daily limit.
4. Similar main meal types vary hugely in salt content, showing it is possible to make and sell meals with less salt.
5. Companies are not complying with Government salt targets, with nearly half (43%) exceeding the maximum target of 1.71g salt. The voluntary system has resulted in an uneven playing field, with some companies performing much better than others.
6. Government should employ mandatory regulation on salt, sugar and calories levels in foods intended for child consumption.

Background

Salt and Health

Strong evidence suggests that excess consumption of salt increases the risk of high blood pressure, which is a major risk factor for strokes and cardiovascular disease (CVD), the leading causes of death in the UK and worldwideⁱ.

It is recommended that adults consume no more than 6g a day, however we are currently consuming 40% more than this (8.4g/day)ⁱⁱ. Unfortunately, many people do not realise they are eating too much salt because the majority is already present in the foods we buy.

This is true for all age groups, including children. Research suggests high consumption of salt in childhood can affect blood pressure and increase the risk of illnesses later in lifeⁱⁱⁱ. Liking salty foods is a learned preference that develops as we get older and become accustomed to the salty taste of foods being made available to us. In order to prevent children from developing a taste for salt in the first place, it is important to reduce the salt content in children's diets.

The UK Government recommends the following maximum daily salt intake for children^{iv}:

Age	Maximum Salt Intake per day
0-6 months	<1g
6-12 months	1g
1-3 years	2g
4-6 years	3g
7-10 years	5g
11 years +	6g

Eating out

Eating out is an enjoyable and popular experience for the family, with a reported 1.7 million kids in the UK preferring to eat out in comparison to their parents' home cooking^v. These meals eaten outside of the home tend to be bigger in portion size and higher in salt and saturated fat than food cooked at home^{viii}.

The aim of this research was to review the salt content of children's meals available in the restaurant sector and explore opportunities for action.

Method

Data Collection

Action on Salt surveyed the salt content of children's meals available in UK restaurants. Data was collected from popular family-friendly restaurants with a children's menu following strict inclusion and exclusion criteria and nutritional information was obtained from their respective websites, or by direct correspondence with the company. A total of 15 restaurants were collected; Ikea, Gourmet Burger Kitchen, Pizza Hut, Pizza Express, Nando's, Beefeater, Brewer's Fayre, Harvester, Miller & Carter, Burger King, McDonald's, Yo Sushi, Hungry Horse, Wagamama and Prezzo. Full available nutritional information of savoury meal items, including starters, mains and sides were collected between May and June 2022 and shared with the companies for verification.

Data Analysis

We collected all dishes from children's menu excluding desserts, drinks and breakfast items. The total salt content per complete main meal (main and sides where available) as intended for consumption was calculated. Where menus provided an option of sides, only the two combinations with the highest salt and lowest salt value were included in the survey data.

Most restaurants surveyed offer two or three courses for a fixed price e.g. starter, main + sides, and/or dessert. The high and low salt variations of each meal was reported.

The restaurant's progress towards achieving the maximum salt reduction target for 2024 was measured.

Comparison to 2019 report

Where possible, salt content of meals has been compared to a previous survey conducted in 2019^{viii}. Only the children's meals with the same meal combination (main and side) in both years were assessed.

Results

Key findings:

- One in three (35%) children's meals served in restaurants contain 2g or more of salt
- Two in five (41%) children's meals are high in salt and 43% exceed the maximum salt target set by the Department of Health
- There is a big variation in salt content by similar meal types of up to 6 times more salt
- A similar proportion of children's meals were high in salt (41%) in 2019 and 2022, demonstrating a lack of progress in the restaurant sector.

Salt levels in children's meals in the restaurant sector

Overall, 305 children's meals from 15 popular restaurant chains were included in this report. On average, Gourmet Burger Kitchen had the highest average salt content per meal (3.8g) followed by Yo Sushi (2.6g) (Table 1).

Table 1. Average Salt Content of Meals for each restaurant

Restaurant	Number of meals	Average Salt (g)
Gourmet Burger Kitchen	8	3.7
Yo Sushi	16	2.6
Prezzo	38	2.4
Pizza Hut	21	2.3
Miller & Carter	20	1.8
Pizza Express	33	1.8
Nando's	10	1.8
Burger King	4	1.7
Pizza Hut	21	1.6
Hungry Horse	39	1.5
Harvester	40	1.3
Wagamama	21	1.2
McDonald's	10	1.2
Beefeater	20	1.2
Brewers Fayre	18	1.1
Ikea	7	0.6

Forty-one percent contained 1.8g or more of salt, which would have a red warning label if colour coded labels were employed in the restaurant sector.

Examples of children’s meals surveyed with the highest salt content:

- **Gourmet Burger Kitchen** Cheeseburger with Skinny Fries – 4.8g
- **Prezzo Gluten-Free Vegan Kids Pepperoni Pizza** – 4.6g
- **Yo Sushi** Chicken Yakisoba Noodles with Sustainable Salmon Maki – 4.6g
- **Pizza Hut** Big Heroes Thin Pizza Margherita with Fries - 4

Lower salt dishes were available, but only one in four (25%) had 1g salt or less. On average **Ikea** had the lowest salt content per meal, followed by **Brewer’s Fayre** (Table 1).

Examples of children’s meals surveyed with the lowest salt content:

- **Ikea** Pasta and Tomato Sauce – 0.03g
- **Hungry Horse** Tomato Pasta with Garden Peas – 0.08g
- **Prezzo Bambini** Penne with Butter – 0.12g
- **Harvester** Recommends Grilled Salmon with Fresh Vegetable Sticks and Garden Peas – 0.15g

Similar meals had varying levels of salt, depending on the restaurant in question. For example, there was at least a 10-fold difference in salt content of pasta Bolognese meals. Similarly, there was a 6-fold difference in the salt content of a burger and fries' (Table 2).

Table 2. Variation of salt content by meal types

Meal Type	Higher Salt Example	Salt (g)	Lower Salt Example	Salt (g)	Variation
Burger and Fries	GBK Cheeseburger and Fries	4.8	Hungry Horse Chicken Burger and Chips	0.8	6 times more salt
Pasta	Miller & Carter Tomato & Meatball Pasta	1.37	Beefeater Spaghetti Bolognese	0.3	4.5 times more salt
Fish Fingers	Miller & Carter Fish Fingers and Chips	1.96	Hungry Horse Fish Fingers and Chips	0.75	2.6 times more salt
Pizza	Pizza Hut Pan Margherita	2.7	Brewer’s Fayre Margherita	1.2	2.3 times more salt
Chicken Strips and Chips	Pizza Hut Breaded Chicken Strips and Fries	2.1	Harvester Buttermilk Fried Chicken Strips and Chips	1.08	1.9 times more salt
Sausage & Mash	Hungry Horse Pork Sausages and Mash	2.36	Beefeater Sausage and Mash	1.6	1.5 times more salt
Breaded Vegetables	Harvester Veggie Fingers with Chips	1.57	McDonald’s Veggie Dippers with Fries	1.01	0.6 times more salt

Many of the restaurants surveyed offer two or three course menus for a fixed price, but they can contribute to excessive consumption of salt, sugars and saturated fat. For each restaurant where set menus are available, examples of meals which are higher or lower in salt have been shown (Appendix I).

The saltiest set menu was Prezzo’s ‘Gluten Free Garlic Bread with Mozzarella (starter) and ‘Gluten-free Vegan Kids Pepperoni pizza (main) containing 7g salt – double the maximum daily intake for a child. This is in comparison to Brewer’s Fayre where Veggie sticks (starter), Spaghetti Bolognese (main) with corn on the cob and peas (vegetables) contain 0.3g salt. Here, there is a 23-fold difference in salt variation.

Miller & Carter’s set meal of Hand cut nachos (starter), Grilled chicken and ratatouille (main) with fries (side) contains 5.7g salt, close to the maximum daily limit for an adult, despite being a child’s meal. In addition, it also contains more than half of an adult’s daily calorie intake (1198kcal) and three-quarters of an adult’s maximum daily intake for saturated fat. This combination is not only excessive for children but adults too as this would be consumed in one meal sitting.

2024 Salt Targets

Of the 305 meals surveyed, 43% had more salt than 1.71g, which is the maximum target set for children’s meals in the restaurant sector. Compliance to the salt targets is not consistent across all businesses (Table 4), with some outlets providing more salt than the maximum recommended levels across their entire children’s menu.

Table 4. Proportion of restaurants which exceed the maximum salt target

Restaurant	Meals (n)	% exceeding maximum salt target
Gourmet Burger Kitchen	8	100%
Pizza Hut	21	76%
Prezzo	38	66%
Yo Sushi	16	63%
Pizza Express	32	61%
Nando's	10	60%
Miller & Carter	20	50%
Hungry Horse	39	41%
Harvester	40	33%
McDonald's	10	20%
Wagamama	21	19%
Beefeater	20	5%
Brewers Fayre	18	0%
Burger King	4	0%
Ikea	7	0%

Comparison to 2019 Data

A similar proportion of children's meals has remained high in salt (41%) since 2019. Of the meals that were surveyed in both years, 44% achieved a reduction in salt content, 33% saw no change and 24% increased from 2019. Burger King reduced the salt in their children's menu by 37%, whilst Pizza Hut's menu option increased by 30% (Table 5).

Table 5. Difference in salt content between both years

Restaurant	Meals (n)	Difference in salt content
Burger King	2	-37%
Nando's	3	-18%
Pizza Express	6	-8%
Wagamama	15	-8%
Harvester	22	3%
McDonald's	4	4%
Gourmet Burger Kitchen	2	6%
Pizza Hut	1	30%

The meal with the greatest reduction in salt was seen in Harvester's 'Rotisserie Chicken with Fresh Vegetable Sticks and Garden Peas' from 1g to 0.44g (56% decrease). Similarly, the meal with the biggest reported increase in salt was Harvester's 'Bigger Appetites, Grilled Chicken Breast with Sweet Potato Fries & Half Corn on the Cob' from 1g to 1.56g (56% increase).



Sheena Bhageerutty, Assistant Nutritionist at Action on Salt says,

“Whilst eating less salt early on in life is a healthier habit which should be embedded into adulthood, most of our salt intake is out of our control as it is already in the food we buy and order when dining out. Restaurants therefore have the very simple option to cook with less salt and help give our children the best start in life.”



Sonia Pombo, Campaign Manager at Action on Salt explains,

“Despite the last two years of the pandemic being a huge challenge for the hospitality sector, restaurants should have seized the opportunity and re-opened their doors with wholesome, nutritious meals to suit our children’s needs. It has been three years since our previous survey was undertaken exposing the unacceptably high salt dishes served up in UK restaurants and is now abundantly clear that no progress has been made. These stark new findings should be a wakeup call to the sector to make children’s health a priority.”



Professor Graham MacGregor, Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine at Queen Mary University of London and Chairman of Action on Salt adds,

“Gradually reducing the salt that is added to our food is the most cost-effective measure for lowering blood pressure and thereby reducing the thousands of strokes and heart disease that are caused by this excessive salt intake. Ministers must now force recalcitrant restaurants to stop adding all of this salt with a mandatory reformulation programme, better labelling and restrictions on marketing and promotions to truly stop this flood of unhealthy food being served up and putting our children’s future health at risk.”

Engagement with Industry

We contacted all 15 restaurants included in this survey and asked them to comment on the salt content of their children's meals along with a few questions on their nutrition policy:

1. Are healthy choices supported with nutritional/healthy eating information?
2. Are salt-shakers only available from the point of service not on tables?
3. If chips or vegetables are offered on the menu, is it pre-seasoned with salt?
4. Is salt reduction included in your company's nutrition policy?

We received written correspondence from only 4 restaurants: McDonald's, Hungry Horse, Nando's and Whitbread (Beefeater, Brewer's Fayre), with a follow-up call with Whitbread to discuss progress in more detail.

While we have been asked to keep most details confidential, we can share some key themes from our correspondence:

- All restaurants either have nutritional or healthy eating information so parents can make a healthier choice. This is in line with the legal requirements of displaying calorie information on the menu. Some menus also provided the sugar and salt content as well as being able to calculate the nutritional value based on customised items.
- The majority of restaurants provided salt shakers only from point of service and not on tables except for one outlet which is still reviewing this.
- Two restaurants are operating healthier practices, such as not seasoning chips on children's menus.
- Companies all have salt reduction included in their Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) reports and therefore publicly commit themselves to providing better, nutritious food. All r4 companies said they were working towards achieving the salt reduction targets by 2024.

General comments from companies below:

WHITBREAD

Beefeater and Brewer's Fayre

"Whitbread has noted the results of Action on Salt's salt survey on children's meals in the out of home sector. We have been longstanding supporters of the Government's salt reduction programmes and have constantly strived to meet the targets for each of these. Our current children's menus are guided by Government and the British Nutrition Foundation's guidance for 5–10-year-old children for which the recommended daily intake of salt is 4g rather than 3g for 4-6 year olds. We recognise that there are different daily salt intakes for specific children's age bands and given we can provide only one children's menu, we have chosen the 5–10-year range as this is the most appropriate to our guest profile.

Whilst we are already meeting the 2024 Government targets on salt, we will continue to engage with stakeholders including Action on Salt and to champion salt reduction with our suppliers and teams ensuring that we don't compromise on the safety, quality and taste of our dishes particularly in products where salt is a key ingredient in their production."



“Reducing salt content is a key priority for Prezzo, and critical component of our Nutrition Strategy. A number of the menu items listed in this report have either been redeveloped or removed from our menus entirely as part of this focus and prior to this report. In addition, as part of our strategy to provide nutritionally balanced meals for children, we have developed an additional option for children under 6 with a very low level of sodium. We will continue to review our levels of salt and identify ways in which it can be reduced without compromising our food quality, safety and flavour.” Olly Smith, Chief Culinary Officer

Recommendations

Below are recommendations for the government, food industry and consumers to help reduce population salt intake and make improvements to the nutritional profile of children's meals. Children's health is everyone's responsibility, and this is an opportunity for the Government and Industry to inform parents and help them make a difference in their future.

Government

- Employ mandatory regulation on salt, sugar and calorie levels in foods intended for child consumption.
- Release progress report on salt reduction without delay, for transparency.
- Develop consumer awareness campaigns to inform the public of the dangers of salt hidden within everyday food.

Food Industry

- Reduce the salt content of children's meals to comply with the salt targets.
- Provide additional useful information on menus, including salt content.
- Avoid pre-seasoning chips or vegetables with salt.
- Increasing offering of vegetables as side dishes in children's set menus.

Consumers

- Ask for children's meals to not be seasoned with salt.
- Swap saltier sides with vegetables to increase vegetable content and reduce overall salt.
- Ask for sauces, dressings and gravy to be served on the side so you can choose how much you add.
- Dishes with olives, cured meats and cheese will be saltier - ask for less of these ingredients.

About us

Action on Salt is a group concerned with salt and its effects on health, supported by 22 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.

Acknowledgements

- MSc Human Nutrition student, Scarlett Freeman from University of Surrey for assistance with data collection
- Sheena Bhageerutty, Assistant Nutritionist Action on Salt for data collection, analysis and preparation of report
- Sonia Pombo, Campaign Manager Action on Salt for preparation of report
- Restaurants' Whitbread (Brewer's Fayre and Beefeater), Nando's, Hungry Horse and McDonald's for their feedback and engagement



@actiononsalt



@actiononsaltandsugar

Appendix

Appendix I: Examples of meals (set menus are available) which are higher or lower in salt

Outlet	Dish	Part of Dish	Salt (g)	Total Fat (g)	Saturates (g)	Calorie (g)
Harvester	Chilli non Carne	Main	2.59	10.6	1	272
	Golden Rice	Side	0.56	2.6	0.2	136
	Fresh Vegetable Sticks	Veg	0.04	0.5	0.3	44
			3.19	13.7	1.3	452
Harvester	Grilled Salmon	Main	0.1	15	3	218
	Fresh Vegetable Sticks	Side	0.04	0.5	0.1	136
	Garden Peas	Veg	0.01	1.2	0.5	74
			0.15	16.7	3.6	428
Brewers Fayre	Baked Garlic & Parsley Flatbread	Starter	0.3	6.3	1.7	148
	Sensational Sausages and Mash	Main	1.7	13	6.1	280
	Baked Beans	Side	0.3	0.1	0.2	41
	Corn on the Cob	Side	0	1.1	0.1	48
			2.3	14.2	6.4	369
Brewers Fayre	Veggie Sticks	Starter	0	0.2	0.2	25
	Spaghetti Bolognese	Main	0.3	5.8	2.2	355
	Corn on the Cob	Vegetables	0	1.1	0.2	48
	Peas	Vegetables	0	0.4	0.1	47
			0.3	7.5	2.7	475
Beefeater	Baked Flatbread with Garlic & Parsley Spread	Starter	0.4	10.9	3.3	209
	Garden Gourmet Sausage & Mash	Main	1.7	13	6.1	280
	Peas	Side	0	0.4	0.1	47
	Corn on the Cob	Side	0	1.1	0.2	48
			2.1	25.4	9.7	584
Beefeater	Veggie Sticks & Dip	Starter	0	0.2	0	25
	Spaghetti Bolognese	Main	0.3	5.8	2.2	355
	Peas	Side	0	0.4	0.1	47
	Corn on the Cob	Side	0	1.1	0.2	48
			0.3	7.5	2.5	475
GBK	Cheese Burger	Main	2.8	19.7	8.7	380
	Skinny Fries	Side	2	14.1	1.2	247
			4.8	33.8	9.9	627
GBK	Chicken Tenders	Main	1.3	8.9	0.9	220
	Chunky skin on fries	Side	1.6	9.2	0.8	182
			2.9	18.1	1.7	402
Hungry Horse	Vegan Quorn sausages	Mains	2.09	N/A	N/A	293
	Mashed Potato	Side	0.63	N/A	N/A	146
	Peas	Side	0	N/A	N/A	60
	Gravy	Sauce	0.3	N/A	N/A	11
			3.02	N/A	N/A	510
Hungry Horse	Chicken wings	Main	0.67			426
	Salad	Veggies	0.1	N/A	N/A	18
	Mini Corn on the cob	Veggies	0.01	N/A	N/A	90
	Texas BBQ	Sauce	0.23	N/A	N/A	45
			1.01	N/A	N/A	579
Prezzo	Gluten-free Garlic Bread with Mozzarella	Starter	2.4	17	7.8	N/A
	Gluten-free Vegan Kids Pepperoni Pizza	Main	4.6	17	1.9	N/A

			7	34	9.7	N/A
Prezzo	Penne Basil Pesto	Main	0.21	18	2.5	N/A
	Vegetable Sticks with Hummus	Starter	0.31	10	1	N/A
			0.52	28	3.5	N/A
Miller & Carter	Hand Cut Nachos	Starter	2.16	31.5	12.5	556
	Grilled Chicken & Ratatouille	Main	2.64	6.8	1.2	375
	Fries	Side	0.9	10.3	1	267
			5.7	48.6	14.7	1198
Miller & Carter	Crispy Calamari	Starter	0.77	23.7	2	315
	Grilled Chicken Breast	Main	0.54	2.4	0.7	244
	Salad	Side of Main	0.18	2.9	0.6	49
			1.49	29	3.3	608
Pizza Express	Gluten-Free Dough Balls with garlic butter (with salad)	Starter	1.4	20.2	9.7	342
	La Reine	Main	2.6	12.3	4.6	437
			4	32.5	14.3	779
Pizza Express	Salad	Starter	0	0.5	0	14
	Pasta Bianca Béchamel sauce with closed cup mushroom	Main	0.7	11.6	6.3	355
			0.7	12.1	6.3	369
Pizza Hut	Pan Pizza Margherita	Main	2.7	14.4	5.4	434
	Fries	Side	1.3	9.3	1.1	209
			4	23.7	6.5	643
Pizza Hut	Mini Corn on the cob	Side	0	3.8	0.6	143
	Gluten Free Pizza Margherita	Main	1.5	17.5	8.2	395
			1.5	21.3	8.8	538
Nando's	Spicy Rice	Side	0.8	3	0.2	123
	Beanie Burger	Main	2.1	19.3	6.5	432
			2.9	22.3	6.7	555
Nando's	Corn on the Cob	Side	0	1.4	0.3	72
	Chicken Breast Fillet	Main	0.7	2.6	0.6	138
			0.7	4	0.9	210
Yo Sushi	Sustainable Salmon Maki	Side	0.98	3.7	0.7	190.4
	Chicken Yakisoba Noodles	Main	3.59	12.8	2	318.9
			4.57	16.5	2.7	509.3
Yo Sushi	Crunchy Cucumber Maki	Side	0.93	0.4	0.1	145.5
	Salmon & Avocado Hand Roll	Main	0.52	9	1.2	164.6
			1.45	9.4	1.3	310.1
Burger King	Fries	Side	0.4	10.1	3.5	216
	Kids Cheeseburger	Main	1.3	12.2	5.5	281.3
			1.7	22.3	9	497.3
Burger King	Fries	Side	0.4	10.1	3.5	216
	Kids Vegan Nuggets	Main	0.8	8.6	0.6	162
			1.2	18.7	4.1	378
McDonald's	Cheeseburger		1.7	12	5.5	298
	Fries		0.44	12	1.1	237
			2.14	24	6.6	535
McDonald's	Cucumber Sticks	Side	0.01	0.5	0	12
	Chicken McNuggets	Main	0.66	8.7	1	174
			0.67	9.2	1	186

References

- ⁱ WHO (World Health Organization): Cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cardiovascular-diseases-\(cvds\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cardiovascular-diseases-(cvds)) (2021)
- ⁱⁱ National Diet and Nutrition Survey: Assessment of salt intake from urinary sodium in adult (aged 19 to 64 years) in England, 2018 to 2019 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/876252/Report_England_Sodium_Survey_2018-to-2019_3_.pdf
- ⁱⁱⁱ Lauer, R. M., & Clarke, W. R. (1989). Childhood risk factors for high adult blood pressure: the Muscatine Study. *Pediatrics*, 84(4), 633–641.
- ^{iv} SACN Salt and Health Report https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/338782/SACN_Salt_and_Health_report.pdf (2003)
- ^v Caterer: Look Who's Dining Report <https://www.caterer.com/insights/family-dining/#/introduction> (2019)
- ^{vi} Reeves, S. (2020). Meal deals, combos and bundling: The impact on the nutrition composition of children's meals in restaurants. *Public Health Nutrition*, 23(12), 2253-2255. doi:10.1017/S1368980019005160
- ^{vii} Reeves, S., Wake, Y., & Zick, A. (2011). Nutrition labeling and portion size information on children's menus in fast-food and table-service chain restaurants in London, UK. *Journal of nutrition education and behavior*, 43(6), 543–547. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2010.12.006>
- ^{viii} Action on Salt: Salt Warning as Children's Meals in the Casual Dining Sector are getting SALTIER and Failing to Meet Public Health England's Targets <https://www.actiononsalt.org.uk/salt-surveys/2019/salt-awareness-week-2019-survey/> (2019)