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# The impact of food and diet on obesity

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### Summary

A debate on the impact of food and diet on obesity will take place on 13 January 2024. The debate has been sponsored by Dr Simon Opher MP.

# 1 Background

## 1.1 Obesity

The NHS defines 'obese' as a term used to describe a person who has excess body fat.<sup>1</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) defines it as a disease impacting most body systems, which leads to a range of noncommunicable diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.<sup>2</sup>

Obesity and its complications can reduce a person's lifetime and quality of life. People with obesity are at increased risk of developing Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, stroke, depression, cancer, reproductive problems and osteoarthritis.<sup>3</sup>

The increase in the prevalence of obesity has become an area of concern for global health. Worldwide, obesity has more than doubled since 1990 and adolescent obesity has quadrupled.<sup>4</sup> In 2022, 2.5 billion adults aged 18 years and over were overweight and 16% were living with obesity.<sup>5</sup>

### Measuring obesity - body mass index (BMI)

The most widely used method of identifying obesity is calculating a person's BMI. BMI is a measure that uses a person's height and weight to work out if their weight is healthy.<sup>6</sup> [The NHS BMI calculator](#) uses a person's score to place them in one of four weight categories:

If your BMI is:

- below 18.5 – you're in the underweight range
- between 18.5 and 24.9 – you're in the healthy weight range
- between 25 and 29.9 – you're in the overweight range
- between 30 and 39.9 – you're in the obese range.<sup>7</sup>

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) generally recommends using BMI as a practical estimate of overweight and obesity in adults, children and young people. However, NICE explains that it should be

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<sup>1</sup> NHS, [Obesity, overview](#), accessed 31 December 2024

<sup>2</sup> WHO, [World Obesity Day 2022 – Accelerating action to stop obesity](#), 4 March 2022

<sup>3</sup> NICE, [Obesity, What are the complications?](#), August 2024

<sup>4</sup> WHO, [Obesity and overweight](#), 1 March 2024

<sup>5</sup> WHO, [Obesity and overweight](#), 1 March 2024

<sup>6</sup> NHS, [What is the body mass index \(BMI\)?](#), accessed 11 April 2023

<sup>7</sup> NHS, [What is the body mass index \(BMI\)?](#), accessed 31 December 2024

interpreted with caution because it is not a direct measure of central adiposity (fat that builds up around the abdomen and lower torso).<sup>8</sup>

NICE has explained that BMI should be used with caution in people with a high muscle mass, and people over the age of 65.<sup>9</sup>

There are also considerations to be made regarding ethnicity. NICE guidance has explained that people with a South Asian, Chinese, other Asian, Middle Eastern, Black African or African-Caribbean family background are prone to accumulating fat around the abdomen and lower torso. These groups also experience cardiometabolic risk at a lower BMI, and so, NICE recommends lowering the BMI score at which they are considered overweight and obese.

There are other means of measuring obesity, but BMI is the most commonly used.

## 1.2 Causes of obesity

Obesity is a complex and multi-factorial condition with many causes. An over-simplified description of the most common cause is “eating too much and moving too little”. The same phrase can be expressed more accurately as an imbalance between energy consumed and energy expended.

This is the most widely accepted factor contributing to obesity, though there is (growing) acknowledgement and understanding of other causes, which we discuss briefly below.

### Unhealthy diet

The development of obesity is gradual, and usually results from a variety of poor diet and lifestyle choices over time.

Some examples of these include eating large amounts of processed or fast food that is high in fat and sugar, excessive alcohol consumption (which is often high in calories and sugar), eating excessive portion sizes, drinking too many sugary drinks and eating to improve mood (comfort eating) as opposed to responding to hunger.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> NICE, [Obesity: identification, assessment and management, clinical guideline \[CG189\]](#), last updated 26 July 2023

<sup>9</sup> NICE, [Obesity: identification, assessment and management, clinical guideline \[CG189\]](#), last updated 26 July 2023

<sup>10</sup> NHS, [Causes, Obesity](#), accessed 7 June 2023

Respondents to the UK-wide [National Diet and Nutrition Survey Rolling Programme](#) (2016-2019) reported a higher free sugar<sup>11</sup> and saturated fat intake than the government recommended amount, as well as a lower fibre intake.<sup>12</sup>

The NHS provides advice on achieving a healthy balanced diet using the [Eatwell Guide](#), which includes a visual representation of government recommendations on eating healthily and achieving a balanced diet. In general, this recommends that people should try to:

- eat at least 5 portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables every day (see [5 A Day](#))
- base meals on higher fibre starchy foods like potatoes, bread, rice or pasta
- have some dairy or dairy alternatives (such as soya drinks)
- eat some beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other protein
- choose unsaturated oils and spreads, and eat them in small amounts
- [drink plenty of fluids](#) (at least 6 to 8 glasses a day)

If you're having foods and drinks that are high in fat, salt and sugar, have these less often and in small amounts.

Try to choose a variety of different foods from the 5 main food groups to get a wide range of nutrients.<sup>13</sup>

Public Health England (now the Office for Health Improvements and Disparities) published [Government Dietary Recommendations](#) in 2016.<sup>14</sup> They provide a summary of the government's recommendations for energy and nutrients for males and females aged 1-18 years and 19+ years. They are based on recommendations made by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN), which provides expert advice to the UK Government on nutrition and health matters.

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<sup>11</sup> Free sugars include those which are added to food or drink, and those found in honey, syrups, unsweetened fruit juices and smoothies. See NHS, [Sugar: the facts](#).

<sup>12</sup> [The National Diet and Nutrition Survey Rolling Programme \(NDNS RP\)](#) is a continuous cross sectional survey, designed to assess the diet, nutrient intake and nutritional status of the general population aged 1.5 years and over living in private households in the UK. A representative sample of around 1,000 people (500 adults and 500 children) take part in the NDNS RP each year. The programme has been jointly funded by the UK Food Standards Agency and Public Health England (now defunct, health promotion functions assumed the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities).

<sup>13</sup> NHS, [Eating a balanced diet](#), accessed 31 December 2024

<sup>14</sup> PHE, [Government Dietary Recommendations, Government recommendations for energy and nutrients for males and females aged 1-18 years and 19+ years](#), Aug 2016

## Inadequate exercise

Individuals who are less physically active reduce their opportunity to use up the energy they consume through food. The extra energy is stored by the body as fat.<sup>15</sup> The NHS publishes [exercise guidelines](#) for children and adults.<sup>16</sup> It sets out an aim for most adults to:

- do strengthening activities that work all the major muscle groups (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders and arms) on at least 2 days a week
- do at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity a week or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity a week
- spread exercise evenly over 4 to 5 days a week, or every day
- reduce time spent sitting or lying down and break up long periods of not moving with some activity<sup>17</sup>

The four UK Chief Medical Officers have also published [physical activity guidelines](#) on the amount and type of physical activity people should be doing to improve their health. They have produced [physical activity infographics](#) highlighting easy ways to lead an active and healthy life for different age groups and for people with disabilities.

## The “food environment”

There is growing acknowledgement of an “obesogenic environment” – a term used to describe several environmental, socioeconomic and cultural factors which increase the risk of obesity:

- changes in food production that have resulted in food becoming cheaper, available in larger portions, tastier and more calorific,<sup>18</sup>
- people eating outside of the home more often,<sup>19</sup>
- increased motorised transport, and<sup>20</sup>
- sedentary working and living patterns.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> NHS, [Obesity](#), accessed 6 June 2023

<sup>16</sup> NHS, [Exercise guidelines](#), accessed 24 April 2023

<sup>17</sup> NHS, [Physical activity guidelines for adults aged 19 to 64](#), accessed 24 April 2023

<sup>18</sup> Cancer Research UK, [What causes obesity?](#), accessed on 8 November 2020

<sup>19</sup> PHE, Health and Wellbeing, Public health matters blog, [Obesity and the environment- the impact of fast food](#), accessed 6 June 2023

<sup>20</sup> Government Office for Science, [Foresight, Tackling Obesities: Future Choices- Project Report, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition](#), 17 October 2007

<sup>21</sup> NHS, [Why we should sit less, Exercise](#), accessed 6 June 2023

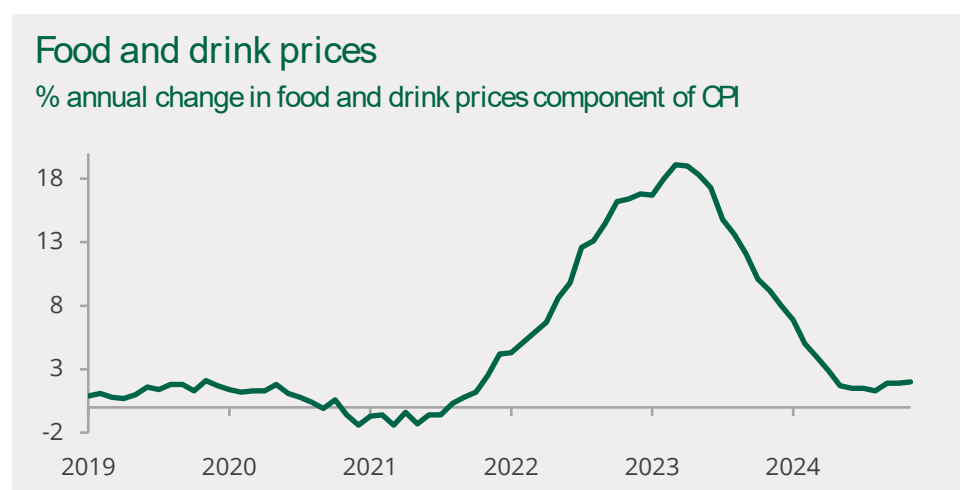
Socioeconomic disadvantage, which is associated with higher BMI<sup>22</sup>, can have a material effect on the environment in which a person lives, and indirectly, the factors that can affect weight. For example, more deprived areas have a higher prevalence of unhealthy takeaways<sup>23</sup> and less access to green outdoor space.<sup>24</sup> Access to green outdoor space is associated with lower BMI and higher levels of physical activity.<sup>25</sup>

Socioeconomic status can also have a direct effect on the quality of nutrition a person is able to access.

## Affordability of healthy food

Low-income households may find it difficult to afford healthy food. According to a Food Foundation report in 2023, the lowest-income fifth of households would have had to spend 50% of their disposable income on food in 2021/22 to meet the costs of the government-recommended healthy diet (the [Eatwell Guide](#)).<sup>26</sup>

Since 2021/22, food prices have increased sharply. The chart below shows that food inflation peaked at 19.1% in March 2023.



Source: ONS, Food and non-alcoholic drink component of CPI, series [D7G8](#) (18 December 2024 (indate))

In response to high inflation in 2022 and 2023, UK adults cut back on spending on essentials like food shopping, even as food prices rose. In March 2023, when food inflation peaked, of the 93% of adults who reported an

<sup>22</sup> BMJ, [Socioeconomic disadvantage is linked to obesity across generations, UK study finds](#), 11 January 2017

<sup>23</sup> PHE, [Health matters: obesity and the food environment](#), published 31 March 2017

<sup>24</sup> PHE, [Local action on health inequalities, Improving access to green spaces](#), 8 September 2014

<sup>25</sup> PHE, [Local action on health inequalities, Improving access to green spaces](#), 8 September 2014

<sup>26</sup> Food Foundation, [The Broken Plate 2023](#), 27 June 2023

increase in their cost of living compared to the previous year, 46% reported spending less on food shopping and essentials.<sup>27</sup>

A BBC Good Food Nation survey in 2023 found that 28% of respondents said they were eating less nutritious food because it was too expensive and 19% were eating more meals and processed foods because they are cheaper.<sup>28</sup>

### Household food insecurity

Household food insecurity is defined in broadly the same way across several countries:<sup>29</sup>

- ‘Low food security’ means that the household reduces the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets.
- ‘Very low food security’ means that household members sometimes disrupt eating patterns or reduce food intake because they lack money or other resources for food.

In 2022/23, 7.2 million people in the UK (11%) were in food insecure households in the UK, according to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)’s Household Below Average Income publication. This included 17% of children, 11% of working-age adults, and 3% of pensioners.<sup>30</sup>

In 2022/23, 2.3 million people in the UK lived in household which had used a food bank in the previous 12 months, a rate of 3%. This includes 6% of children, 3% of working-age adults, and around 1% of pensioners.<sup>31</sup>

The Library briefing [Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals](#) provides more information and statistics on household food insecurity.

### Disability, illness and medication

Obesity can be caused or worsened by some medical conditions, such as underactive thyroid gland, Cushing’s syndrome and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). In addition, individuals with disabilities are twice as likely to be physically inactive when compared to non-disabled people.<sup>32</sup> Obesity can also be a side effect of some medications such as steroids,

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<sup>27</sup> Office for National Statistics, [Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: household finances](#), 8 to 19 March 2023 edition

<sup>28</sup> [“UK families ‘eating less healthily’ due to cost of living crisis”](#), The Guardian, 2 October 2023

<sup>29</sup> This definition is based on the Household Food Security Survey Module, developed by the US Department of Agriculture. Source: US Department of Agriculture, [Food Security in the US](#) (Accessed 1 September 2024)

<sup>30</sup> DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#), Tables 9.1b, 9.3b, 9.5b, 9.7b

<sup>31</sup> DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#), Tables 9.1b, 9.3b, 9.5b, 9.7b

<sup>32</sup> PHE, [Physical activity for general health benefits in disabled adults: Summary of a rapid evidence review for the UK Chief Medical Officers’ update of the physical activity guidelines](#), October 2018



antipsychotics, insulin and beta blockers.<sup>33</sup> Individuals who quit smoking can often experience unwanted weight gain.<sup>34</sup>

## Genetics

Research has shown that hundreds of genes might contribute, in some way, to overweight or obesity.<sup>35</sup>

Genes contribute to obesity because they affect appetite, satiety (the feeling of fullness), metabolism, food cravings, body-fat distribution and the tendency to use eating as a way to manage stress.<sup>36</sup>

It is not yet clear from the research, what extent a person's genes might account for a predisposition to overweight and obesity.<sup>37</sup>

## Excess consumption of ultra-processed food

Processed food is food that has undergone any form of processing. There are different extents of food processing. The simplest methods include pressing, milling and drying. More complex processing can include chemical modification or the addition of colours, flavours and other additives.

Ultra-processed foods can be defined as products formulated mostly or entirely from food constituents that are never or rarely found in home cooking. There is some evidence to suggest that consumption of ultra-processed foods is associated with weight gain and obesity in adults,<sup>38</sup> and an increased risk of cancer incidence and mortality.<sup>39</sup> Further information is available in section 2.5 of this briefing.

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<sup>33</sup> PHE, [Physical activity for general health benefits in disabled adults: Summary of a rapid evidence review for the UK Chief Medical Officers' update of the physical activity guidelines](#), October 2018

<sup>34</sup> PHE, [Physical activity for general health benefits in disabled adults: Summary of a rapid evidence review for the UK Chief Medical Officers' update of the physical activity guidelines](#), October 2018

<sup>35</sup> Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, [Why people become overweight](#), 24 June 2019

<sup>36</sup> Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, [Why people become overweight](#), 24 June 2019

<sup>37</sup> Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, [Why people become overweight](#), 24 June 2019

<sup>38</sup> WHO, International Agency for Research on Cancer, [Consumption of ultra-processed foods associated with weight gain and obesity in adults: a multi-national cohort study](#), 6 September 2021

<sup>39</sup> [Ultra-processed food consumption, cancer risk and cancer mortality: a large-scale prospective analysis within the UK Biobank](#), Chang, Kiara et al. eClinicalMedicine, Volume 56, 101840

## 2

# House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee report

The House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee published its report, [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#), in October 2024.

When applying for this debate, Dr Simon Opher stated that the report “made some quite radical suggestions on our food policy”. He added that “given the huge impact of obesity on probably all the five missions<sup>40</sup> of Government, it is high time we had a debate and got different aspects of how we treat obesity into the public domain”.<sup>41</sup>

In its report, the committee expressed deep concern about the prevalence of overweight and obesity in the UK, and identified ways in which it considered the current food system to be contributing to this.

The committee was critical of government policies on obesity, which it considered to have failed because those “policies have relied on personal choice rather than tackling the underlying drivers of unhealthy diets”.<sup>42</sup>

Its key recommendations included that the government adopt a new food strategy to address “the wide-ranging consequences of the food system failures identified in this report” and introduce a new overarching legislative framework for a healthier food system. Further detail on the report’s recommendations is provided below.

The government has written to the committee [asking for an extension of the timeline for a government response](#), to 31 January 2025.

## 2.1

# Food strategy and legislation

The Lords Committee report [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#) recommended that the government should “adopt a new, comprehensive and integrated food strategy to address the wide-ranging consequences of the food system failures identified in this report”. It also

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<sup>40</sup> The Labour Government has set out [five missions for Britain](#); secure the highest sustainable growth in the G7, make Britain a clean energy superpower, build an NHS fit for the future, make Britain’s streets safe, and break down the barriers to opportunity at every stage.

<sup>41</sup> Backbench Business Committee, [Representations: Backbench Debates](#), 3 December 2024, Q13

<sup>42</sup> House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#), HL Paper 19, published 24 October 2024

called on the government to “introduce a new overarching legislative framework for a healthier food system”.<sup>43</sup>

The committee proposed that “this legislation should require that the Government publish a new, comprehensive and integrated long-term food strategy, setting out targets for the food system and the Government’s plans to introduce, implement and enforce policy interventions to achieve those targets”. As part of this new legislative framework, “the Food Standards Agency (FSA) should be given oversight of the food system” which is “transparent and independent of industry”. The FSA “should include monitoring and reporting annually to Parliament against targets for sales of healthier and less healthy foods, on the overall healthiness of diets, on related national health outcomes, and on progress against Government strategy”.<sup>44</sup>

In 2018, the government commissioned Henry Dimbleby [to undertake an independent review into developing a National Food Strategy for England](#). The review was published in two parts, in 2020 and 2022. [Part one](#), published in July 2020, focused on managing the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and preparing for the end of the Brexit transition period in December 2020. [Part two](#) was published in July 2021, and took “a close look at how the food system really works, the damage it is doing to our bodies and our ecosystem, and the interventions we could make to prevent these harms”.<sup>45</sup>

In response to the National Food Strategy review, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) published the [Government food strategy for England](#) in June 2022. For further detail on the government strategy and the mixed initial reactions to it, see section 1.6 of the Library briefing [Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals](#) (September 2024).

In December 2024, Environment Secretary Steve Reed announced that the [government would create a new food strategy in 2025](#). The Grocer has reported on [initial reactions from the food industry](#), which broadly welcomed the announcement. However, The Grocer noted that “there is huge nervousness widespread in the sector over the potential for the strategy to bring with it a raft of regulation, taxes and increased costs”.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> House of Lords, Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#), HL Paper 19, published 24 October 2024, paras 1 and 3

<sup>44</sup> House of Lords, Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#), HL Paper 19, published 24 October 2024, para 3

<sup>45</sup> National Food Strategy, [The Report](#), July 2021

<sup>46</sup> The Grocer, [National Food Strategy to assemble food industry coalition](#), 11 December 2024

## 2.2

# Industry reporting on sales of less healthy foods

In July 2021, [part two of the National Food Strategy \(NFS\)](#) (PDF) recommended mandatory reporting against several metrics for large food companies:

there should be a statutory duty for all food companies with more than 250 employees – including retailers, restaurant and quick service companies, contract caterers, wholesalers, manufacturers and online ordering platforms – to publish an annual report on the following set of metrics:

- Sales of food and drink high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS) excluding alcohol
- Sales of protein by type (of meat, dairy, fish, plant, or alternative protein) and origin
- Sales of vegetables
- Sales of fruit
- Sales of major nutrients: fibre, saturated fat, sugar and salt
- Food waste
- Total food and drink sales.<sup>47</sup>

Part two of the NFS proposed introducing new primary legislation to achieve this, via a ‘Good Food Bill’.<sup>48</sup> This bill would “set a long-term statutory target to improve diet-related health” and would require expanding the remit of the FSA, which would “have powers and duties to advise the Government on the contents of its five-yearly Action Plans, and to provide an annual, independent progress report to Parliament”.<sup>49</sup> As noted above, the Lords Committee also made a recommendation on new legislation and the role of the FSA.

In June 2022, the [Government food strategy for England](#) launched the [Food Data Transparency Partnership \(FDTP\)](#). The FDTP includes government (DHSC, Defra and the FSA), industry, academia and civil society. Participation is voluntary for businesses. The FDTP published a policy paper on 10 May 2024 setting out its [priorities for the next 12 months](#).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> National Food Strategy, [The Report](#), July 2021, Appendix 2

<sup>48</sup> National Food Strategy, [The Report](#), July 2021, Appendix 2

<sup>49</sup> National Food Strategy, [The Report](#), July 2021, Appendix 14

<sup>50</sup> Defra, [FDTP: towards consistent, accurate and accessible environmental impact quantification for the agri-food industry](#), updated 10 May 2024

The FDTP “aims to improve the availability, quality and comparability of data in the food supply chain”. It has several working groups, including a Health Working group, which was “created to consider metrics that support food and drink companies to voluntarily report on the healthiness of their sales in a consistent format”.<sup>51</sup> [Membership of the Health Working Group](#) (PDF) includes representatives from the food industry.

None of the FDTP’s working groups have met since the General Election in July 2024.<sup>52</sup>

On 21 November 2024, The Grocer reported that the FDTP had “proved controversial after dropping initial plans to create mandatory targets on both key areas [environment and health]”. It noted that work had been “put on hold since the election” and said that [the government was considering changing the FDTP](#):

The government is to announce a shake-up of the Food Data Transparency Partnership amid claims from ministers it has “lost the voice of consumers” and does not have enough scrutiny from outside the ranks of industry bosses.

[...] sources have suggested the move by Labour will increase the changes of the FDTP’s work leading to the introduction of mandatory reporting for the industry, despite fears over the bureaucracy and cost involved.<sup>53</sup>

## 2.3 Reformulation and the Soft Drinks Industry Levy

The Lords Committee report [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#) noted that “the Government has run voluntary reformulation programmes for salt, sugar and calorie reduction, with varying levels of success”.<sup>54</sup> It concluded that “there are opportunities to build on the success of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy to drive reformulation”.<sup>55</sup>

The Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) came into effect in 2018, and imposes a levy on producers and importers of soft drinks that contain added sugar. It does not apply to drinks that are at least 75% milk by volume, milk

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<sup>51</sup> Gov.uk, [Food Data Transparency Partnership](#), accessed 2 January 2025

<sup>52</sup> Minutes of working group meetings are available on the website: Gov.uk, [Food Data Transparency Partnership](#). The Health Working Group’s most recent minutes are from April 2024.

<sup>53</sup> The Grocer, [Food transparency body faces shake-up in independence push](#), 21 November 2024

<sup>54</sup> House of Lords, Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#), HL Paper 19, published 24 October 2024, para 279

<sup>55</sup> House of Lords, Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#), HL Paper 19, published 24 October 2024, para 8

substitutes like soya or almond milk, those made with fruit or vegetable juice and that do not have any other added sugar, and alcohol replacements.<sup>56</sup>

A [progress report on both the voluntary sugar reduction programme and the SDIL](#) by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID), published in December 2022, noted that:

The results presented in this report demonstrate that a voluntary sugar reduction and product reformulation programme can deliver progress, change and innovation. This is demonstrated by the reductions seen but particularly for retailer and manufacturer branded breakfast cereals, yogurts and fromage frais, milk based and Soft Drink Industry Levy drinks; and by some individual businesses and brands.<sup>57</sup>

At the Autumn Budget on 30 October 2024, the government announced that [the SDIL would be uprated](#) in line with inflation. On 5 November 2024, the government also stated that it [was reviewing the exemption for milk-based drinks](#).

For further information on the SDIL, see section 9 of the Library briefing on [Obesity policy in England](#) (June 2023).

The Lords Committee suggested that “the salt and sugar reformulation tax proposed by the 2021 National Food Strategy would offer industry a powerful incentive to produce and sell healthier food”.<sup>58</sup> The previous government stated in February 2024 that it had [no plans to introduce this tax](#).

In May 2023, the Independent reported Keir Starmer, then Leader of the Opposition, as saying that [he would not “impose a salt and sugar tax](#) on foods, citing the cost-of-living crisis – but did not rule out introducing one should economic pressures ease under a Labour government”.<sup>59</sup>

## 2.4

## Advertising of HFSS foods

Currently, the advertising of goods and services is regulated by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). [The Advertising Standards Authority \(ASA\)](#) is the UK’s single independent advertising regulator in all mediums, it does this by enforcing the Advertising Codes. There are separate codes for non-broadcast adverts (the [CAP Code](#)) and broadcast advertisements (the [BCAP Code](#)). In response to concerns about childhood obesity, both the

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<sup>56</sup> HMRC, [Check if your drink is liable for the Soft Drinks Industry Levy](#), 12 April 2023

<sup>57</sup> Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, [Sugar reduction programme: industry progress 2015 to 2020](#), 1 December 2022, page 90

<sup>58</sup> House of Lords, Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#), HL Paper 19, published 24 October 2024, para 8

<sup>59</sup> Independent, [Starmer renews junk food ban pledge but rules out salt and sugar tax](#), 22 May 2023

CAP and BCAP Codes place restrictions on the placement and content of HFSS product advertisements. A ban on the advertising of HFSS products during children's television programmes, and programmes with a high proportion of children viewers, was introduced in 2007.

Following two consultations (an [initial consultation in 2019](#)<sup>60</sup> and a [second consultation in 2020](#))<sup>61</sup>, the government published in June 2021 a [formal response on advertising restrictions for HFSS products](#).<sup>62</sup> To protect children, the government said it would introduce the following advertising restrictions:

- A 9pm watershed for advertisements of HFSS products, applicable to television and UK on-demand programmes.
- A prohibition on paid-for advertising of unhealthy food and drink products online.

Both restrictions are legislated for in the [Health and Care Act 2022](#) (schedule 18), which received Royal Assent on 28 April 2022. The act inserted new powers into the [Communications Act 2003](#), enabling the restrictions to be taken forward in secondary legislation.

The government states that from December 2022 to March 2023 it consulted on draft regulations, seeking views on the clarity of the definitions set out in the draft regulations of the products, businesses and services in scope of the advertising restrictions, and on specific exemptions around audio-only content.<sup>63</sup>

The advertising restrictions were originally planned to come into force on 1 January 2023. However, they were postponed for a year and were then further delayed by the previous government until 1 October 2025.

In the King's Speech on 17 July 2024, the government announced it would legislate to restrict advertising of HFSS food to children.<sup>64</sup> It also said it would restrict the sale of high caffeine energy drinks to under 16s.

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<sup>60</sup> Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, [Further advertising restrictions for products high in fat, salt and sugar](#), published 18 March 2019

<sup>61</sup> Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, [Total restriction of online advertising for products high in fat, sugar and salt \(HFSS\)](#), published 10 November 2020

<sup>62</sup> Department of Health and Social Care, [Government delays restrictions on multibuy deals and advertising on TV and online](#), 14 May 2022

<sup>63</sup> Department for Culture, Media & Sport; Department for Health & Social Care; Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, [Consultation outcome: Introducing further advertising restrictions on TV and online for products high in fat, salt or sugar: government response to consultation on secondary legislation](#), 12 September 2024

<sup>64</sup> Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street and His Majesty King Charles III, [The King's Speech 2024](#), 17 July 2024



On 12 September 2024, the [government published a response to the 2022 consultation](#) on secondary legislation to introduce TV and online advertising restrictions for HFSS products.<sup>65</sup> It said the new rules would be in place from 1 October 2025. At the same time, the government launched a targeted technical consultation to clarify how the regulations would apply to internet protocol television (IPTV) services, which are services that deliver TV and advertising live over the internet.

On 3 December 2024, [the government published a document](#) summarising the feedback received to its consultation on IPTV and next steps.<sup>66</sup> The government said it would amend the secondary legislation to clarify that Ofcom-regulated IPTV services would be subject to the 9pm broadcast watershed rather than the 24-hour online restrictions, this would be consistent with the treatment of linear broadcast and Ofcom-regulated on-demand programme services and provide clarity for those complying with and enforcing the regulations.

Further information is provided in a Library briefing, [Advertising of HFSS food and drink to children](#) (PDF) (16 September 2024).

## 2.5 Ultra-processed food

The NOVA food classification system provides a means of quantifying the extent of food processing.<sup>67</sup> This system defines ultra-processed foods (UPFs) as products formulated mostly or entirely from food constituents that are never or rarely found in home cooking. They are often high in fat, salt or sugar content, and contain less fibre and protein than other foods. They are typically mass-produced and packaged. Examples include breads, sweetened breakfast cereals, buns, biscuits, sweet or savoury packaged snacks, instant soups and noodles, processed meat, and certain industrially pre-prepared meals.<sup>68</sup>

There is some consideration to be made as to how far the NOVA classification should be used in policymaking. The House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee said “it is widely considered that the NOVA

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<sup>65</sup> Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Department of Health and Social Care, and Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, [Consultation outcome: Introducing further advertising restrictions on TV and online for products high in fat, salt or sugar: government response to consultation on secondary legislation](#), 12 September 2024

<sup>66</sup> Department of Health and Social Care, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, [Introducing further advertising restrictions on TV and online for less healthy food and drink: government response to consultation on IPTV](#), 3 December 2024

<sup>67</sup> Monteiro CA, Cannon G, Moubarac JC et al. 2017. [The UN Decade of Nutrition, the NOVA food classification and the trouble with ultra-processing](#). Public Health Nutrition, 21, 5-17 (PDF)

<sup>68</sup> WHO, International Agency for Research on Cancer, [Consumption of ultra-processed foods associated with weight gain and obesity in adults: a multi-national cohort study](#), 6 September 2021



classification for UPFs lacks sufficient precision to be suitable for the characterisation or regulation of individual foods”.<sup>69</sup>

There are [other classification systems](#) used to quantify the extent of food processing.<sup>70</sup> They use different approaches, and not all of them consider the nutritional content of foods. SACN reviewed eight classification systems and found that NOVA is the most commonly identified classification system in scientific literature.<sup>71</sup>

In July 2023, SACN published a [position statement on processed foods and health](#).<sup>72</sup> It followed a review in which SACN considered the availability and quality of evidence associating different forms or levels of food processing with health outcomes. SACN evaluated twenty [systematic reviews](#); of these, ten considered associations between UPF and health outcomes:

- overweight and obesity (2 standardised reviews),
- chronic non-communicable diseases including type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease (CVD), cerebrovascular disease and gastrointestinal tract disease (2 standardised reviews),
- depression (2 standardised reviews),
- mortality risk including all-cause mortality, CVD-cause mortality, heart-cause mortality and cancer-cause mortality (2 standardised reviews), and
- maternal and child health outcomes including gestational weight gain, gestational diabetes, hypertension during pregnancy, pre-eclampsia, low-birth weight, large-for-gestational age, preterm birth and child adiposity (2 standardised reviews).

The SACN report noted that the standardised reviews consistently reported that increased consumption of processed foods was associated with increased risks of adverse health outcomes.<sup>73</sup> SACN did, however, note uncertainties about the quality of evidence available. The committee explained that studies are almost exclusively observational and confounding factors or key variables, such as energy intake, body mass index, smoking and socioeconomic status may not be adequately accounted for.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> House of Lords, Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#), HL Paper 19, published 24 October 2024

<sup>70</sup> OHID, [SACN statement on processed foods and health – summary report](#), 11 July 2023

<sup>71</sup> OHID, [SACN statement on processed foods and health](#), 11 July 2023, section 4

<sup>72</sup> OHID, [SACN statement on processed foods and health](#), 11 July 2023

<sup>73</sup> OHID, [SACN statement on processed foods and health – summary report](#), 11 July 2023

<sup>74</sup> OHID, [SACN statement on processed foods and health – summary report](#), 11 July 2023

## 2.6 Creating a healthier local food environment

A Public Health England (PHE) webpage, [Health matters: obesity and the food environment](#), provides information about features which contribute to an unhealthy food environment, and how local authorities can support food businesses to offer healthier food choices.<sup>75</sup> PHE also published a [toolkit](#) to help councils provide food businesses with support to offer healthier alternatives.<sup>76</sup>

The increasing consumption of out-of-home meals has been identified as an important factor contributing to rising levels of obesity. PHE estimated in 2014 that there were over 50,000 fast food and takeaway outlets, fast food delivery services, and fish and chip shops in England. The planning system has a role in directing where hot food takeaways are located. The [National Planning Policy Framework](#) states that planning applications for such outlets should be refused where they are “within walking distance of schools and other places where children and young people congregate, unless the location is within a designated town centre; or in locations where there is evidence that a concentration of such uses is having an adverse impact on local health, pollution or anti-social-behaviour”.<sup>77</sup>

PHE guidance (February 2020) on [using the planning system to promote healthy weight environments](#) has evidence that “creating a healthier food environment, through the planning system and supporting local businesses and workplaces to provide healthier food and drink, will help enable people access healthier options”.<sup>78</sup> It highlights that “the single most common planning policy adopted to promote health (by 33 local planning authorities), has been the introduction of takeaway food outlet exclusion zones around locations often frequented by children and families.”

## 2.7 Front of pack food labelling on nutrition

The Lords Committee report [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#) recommended “mandatory front-of-pack nutrition labelling that clearly distinguishes healthier and less healthy products, in a form

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<sup>75</sup> PHE, Guidance, [Health matters: obesity and the food environment](#), 31 Mar 2017

<sup>76</sup> PHE, Guidance, [Strategies for Encouraging Healthier ‘Out of Home’ Food Provision, A toolkit for local councils working with small food businesses](#), 31 March 2017

<sup>77</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), December 2024

<sup>78</sup> Public Health England, [Using the planning system to promote healthy weight environments Guidance and supplementary planning document template for local authority public health and planning teams](#) (PDF), February 2020

determined by independent, publicly funded research with UK consumers in real-world situations”.<sup>79</sup>

It is [mandatory for nutrition information to be displayed](#) on the back of food packaging. This is a requirement under section 3 of [Regulation \(EU\) No 1169/2011 on the provision of food information to consumers](#), known as the FIC regulations.

The UK also has a voluntary front-of-pack nutritional labelling scheme, known as the traffic light scheme, which labels the energy value of the food as well as quantities of fat, saturated fats, sugars, protein and salt.

In 2020, the government consulted on [Front-of-pack nutrition labelling in the UK](#), but a government response was not published. In October 2024, the government said that “if changes to Front of Pack Nutrition Labelling are required in future, we will publish findings and consult again on the proposed policy changes”.<sup>80</sup>

The Lords Committee also recommended that “The Government should make prominent nutrition labelling mandatory for all businesses in the out-of-home sector by the end of this Parliament, in a comparable form to labelling in the in-home sector”.<sup>81</sup>

In 2022, [calorie labelling on menus became mandatory for large food businesses](#) (those with 250 or more employees) in the out of home sector. In October 2024, the government stated that [it would evaluate the policy by 2027](#):

We continue to evaluate the impact of the Out of Home Calorie Labelling Regulations, including on people living with eating disorders. We will publish a post-implementation review within five years of implementation which will consider the effectiveness of the policy.<sup>82</sup>

## 2.8

## Maternal and infant nutrition

There are restrictions and prohibitions on the promotion and advertising of infant and follow-on formula, both in the UK and internationally. These are in place to encourage breastfeeding, which is recognised as providing the best nutritional and health benefits for babies.<sup>83</sup> SACN has recommended

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<sup>79</sup> House of Lords, Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#), HL Paper 19, published 24 October 2024, para 364

<sup>80</sup> Written question [UIN HL1641, Food: Sugar](#), answered 24 October 2024

<sup>81</sup> House of Lords, Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#), HL Paper 19, published 24 October 2024, para 367

<sup>82</sup> Written question [UIN 1903, Food: Labelling](#), answered 21 October 2024

<sup>83</sup> NHS, [Benefits of breastfeeding](#), accessed 3 January 2025

that babies are exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life, and that breastfeeding is continued up until the first year.<sup>84</sup>

UK government policy and legislation seeks to ensure that all infant formulas meet compositional standards (which include minimum and maximum levels of essential nutrients). Information about the [regulatory and policy framework](#) has been published by the Competition and Markets Authority (PDF).<sup>85</sup>

The Lords Committee report [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#) highlighted the importance of addressing nutrition in pre-conception, and during pregnancy and infancy to reduce the risk of obesity and diet-related disease.

The committee recommended that the government strengthen regulation on the composition and marketing of follow-on, toddler and growing up milks, banning the promotion of such products.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) launched a market study into the supply of infant formula and follow-on formula in the UK, and published an [interim report](#) in November 2024.<sup>86</sup> While it did not identify any concerns about the nutritional content of these products, it discussed problems including limited price competition, high prices and challenges parents face in making informed choices. A final market study report is due to be published in February 2025.<sup>87</sup>

During a November 2024 debate on infant formula regulations, Minister for Care Stephen Kinnock said the government's infant formula regulations ensure parents and carers have access to the highest quality and safe infant formula.<sup>88</sup> He said the regulations rightly restrict the inappropriate marketing and promotion of infant formula.

[The Healthy Start Scheme](#) is an NHS scheme through which pregnant women and children under 4 years are provided with cards to support the purchase of healthy food and vitamins.<sup>89</sup> Purchases can include plain liquid cow's milk, vegetables and pulses, infant formula milk based on cow's milk, and vitamins.

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<sup>84</sup> Public Health England, [Feeding in the first year of life: SACN report](#), 17 July 2018

<sup>85</sup> Competition and Markets Authority, [Appendix A: Regulatory and policy framework](#) (PDF), not dated

<sup>86</sup> Competition and Markets Authority, [Infant formula and follow-on formula market study, interim report](#), 8 November 2024

<sup>87</sup> Competition and Markets Authority, [Infant formula: CMA sets out concerns and potential solutions](#), 8 November 2024

<sup>88</sup> HC Deb, [Infant formula regulations](#), 13 November 2024

<sup>89</sup> NHS, [Get help to buy food and milk \(the Healthy Start scheme\)](#), accessed 8 January 2024

Eligibility depends on the receipt of certain benefits, however pregnant women under 18 years can claim even if they do not receive benefits.

## 2.9

## School meals

[The Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014](#) set out mandatory school food standards. It sets out food groups and specifies how many portions from each group should be made available.

The Department for Education has published guidance, [School food standards practical guide](#) and [School food in England](#), which provide more information on how to meet the requirements.<sup>90</sup>

School governors are responsible for ensuring compliance, and the government has said they should “appropriately challenge the headteacher and the senior leadership team to ensure the school is meeting its obligations”.<sup>91</sup>

The Department for Education, along with the National Governance Association, is running a [pilot online training course on school food for governors and trustees](#).<sup>92</sup> This launched on 4 November 2024 and will run until 1 April 2025.

### Procurement

The [Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services \(GBSF\)](#) sets out standards for public sector organisations to apply when procuring food and catering services. These standards relate to food production, processing and distribution, nutrition, resource efficiency, and socio-economic considerations. Some of the standards are mandatory, and some are best practice.

Use of [the GBSF is mandatory](#) for catering in government buildings, the NHS hospitals, the armed forces and prisons. The wider public sector is encouraged, but not mandated, to comply with the standards. The GBSF is referenced by the [School Food Standards for England](#).

The Lords Committee recommended “reforms to the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services to ensure that schools as well as other public sector organisations must procure healthier food”.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Department for Education, [School food standards practical guide](#), 19 September 2024

<sup>91</sup> [PQ17953](#), 12 December 2024

<sup>92</sup> National Governance Association, [NGA launches free e-learning module on school food standards – in partnership with DfE](#), 4 November 2024

<sup>93</sup> House of Lords, Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#), HL Paper 19, published 24 October 2024, para 425

## Review of GBSF

Previously in April 2021, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee published a [report on public sector procurement of food](#). The committee's recommendations included that the GBSF should be updated in relation to nutrition. The committee also called for the GBSF to be mandatory across the public sector.

The government had [consulted on updating the nutrition standards in the GBSF](#) in 2019 to reflect the latest scientific advice. This followed a commitment in the government's 2018 [Childhood obesity: a plan for action](#). The updated nutrition standards were published in August 2021 with [supporting technical guidance](#). For further information, see the Library briefing for a [Debate on public sector food procurement and healthy eating](#) (December 2023).

In summer 2022, Defra held a [consultation on possible changes to public sector food and catering policy](#), including updating the GBSF. Defra explained that public sector food procurement had been featured in the National Food Strategy review as well as the EFRA Committee inquiry, and that recommendations from both reports were being considered. These included:

- updating the buying standards to ensure procurement of healthy, sustainable food
- making the standards mandatory across the entire public sector
- improving and monitoring compliance with the standards.

The previous government [did not publish a response to the consultation](#). In October 2024, the current government stated that it was [reviewing the policy](#).

## 3

## Parliamentary material

### 3.1

### Written statements

Written statement - [Implementation of advertising restrictions for less healthy food or drink on television and online](#)

HC Deb 03 December 2024 | HCWS278

Andrew Gwynne | Department: Health and Social Care

This Government is committed to creating the healthiest generation of children ever and today we are taking another step towards achieving that goal.

Further to my statement on 12 September 2024, I wish to inform the House that today the Government will lay the Advertising (Less Healthy Food Definitions and Exemptions) Regulations 2024 and an Explanatory Memorandum before Parliament. This legislation enacts the provisions set out in the Health and Care Act 2022, which amended the Communications Act 2003, for a 9pm watershed on the advertising of less healthy food or drink on television (TV) and a 24-hour restriction on paid-for advertising of these products online. Alongside laying the Regulations, the Government is publishing a response to the technical consultation held between September and October 2024 on how the advertising restrictions apply to Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) services, which deliver TV and advertising live over the internet. The consultation response confirms that IPTV services regulated by Ofcom will be subject to the broadcast restrictions (9pm watershed), in the same way as other Ofcom-regulated TV and on-demand programme services, and we have clarified this in the final Regulations. The Government is also publishing guidance for industry on the food or drink categories in scope of the advertising restrictions to support their preparation for implementation.

Following previous policy consultations and the Government's response on 12 September 2024 to the consultation on the draft secondary legislation, the legislation and guidance published today provide businesses with further certainty in terms of the products, businesses and services in scope of the restrictions as well as practical guidance on their application, so that they can continue to prepare ahead of the restrictions coming into force on 1 October 2025. We will continue to engage with stakeholders during this period.

This delivers on our Manifesto commitment to implement the junk food advertising restrictions without further delay and in doing so we expect to

remove 7.2 billion calories from UK children's diets per year and reduce the number of children living with obesity by 20,000.

Obesity is the second biggest preventable cause of cancer and costs the UK health service more than £11 billion each year. By taking preventative action now, the Government will begin fixing the foundations of good health and protecting the next generation so that it can become the healthiest ever.

The Government's response to the IPTV consultation and guidance on food or drink products in scope of the restrictions will be published on GOV.UK shortly.

Written statement - [Implementation of advertising restrictions for less healthy food and drink on television and online](#)

HC Deb 12 September 2024 | HCWS93

Andrew Gwynne | Department: Health and Social Care

I wish to update the House on the Government's progress to deliver our Manifesto commitment to implement restrictions on junk food advertising on TV and online.

The country wants to see our broken NHS fixed. Our Health Mission makes clear that this requires a prevention revolution, tackling the drivers of preventable illness and reducing demand on health services. One of these pressures is the childhood obesity crisis, setting up children for an unhealthy life and generating yet greater pressures on the NHS. More than one in five children in England are overweight or living with obesity by the time they start primary school, and this rises to more than one third by the time they leave. We want to tackle the problem head on and that includes implementing the restrictions on junk food advertising on TV and online without further delay. We will introduce a 9pm watershed on TV advertising, and a total ban on paid-for online advertising. These restrictions will help protect children from being exposed to advertising of less healthy food and drinks, which evidence shows influences their dietary preferences from a young age.

I am today confirming that we have published the Government's response to the 2022 consultation on the draft secondary legislation. This is a key milestone which confirms the definitions for the products, businesses and services in scope of the restrictions. This provides the clarity that businesses have been calling for and will support them to prepare for the restrictions coming into force across the UK on 1 October 2025.

As part of our response, we will clarify how the regulations will apply to Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) which delivers television live over the



internet. Our proposal is to make clear in the regulations that IPTV services regulated by Ofcom will be subject to the broadcast 9pm watershed in the same way as other TV and Ofcom-regulated on-demand programme services. This requires clarification within the secondary legislation and, in line with our statutory duty to consult, we are launching a targeted consultation which is open for four weeks from today.

These steps mean we can move forward to laying the final legislation and publishing guidance. I will provide a further update to the House when the secondary legislation is laid to implement the advertising restrictions on 1 October 2025.

The Government's response to the 2022 consultation and the IPTV consultation have been published on GOV.UK.

## 3.2 Debate

Lords Question for Short Debate - [Diets: Fat](#)

HL Deb 31 October 2024 | Vol 840 cc182GC-196GC

## 3.3 Committee report

[House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee report - Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system. Food, Diet and Obesity Committee report](#)

15 Oct 2024 | HL 19 2024-25

## 3.4 PQs

[Nutrition](#)

Asked by: Shannon, Jim

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what estimate he has made of the number of people being treated for diet related illnesses.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

Diet is an important part of maintaining good health and reducing the risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers, such as bowel, breast, and pancreatic cancer. Illnesses related to diet are very broad, ranging from malnutrition, dental decay, mental health conditions, and other diseases attributable to overweight and obesity.

Comparable data is not directly available on the number of people being treated for all diet related illnesses. There is data on the number of people being treated for some illnesses which can be attributed to dietary risk factors. However, it is not known if all these cases were caused by diet related risk factors. From a malnutrition perspective, in 2022/23, there were 10,795 admissions for malnutrition reported by National Health Service trusts. Further information on malnutrition is available at the following link:

<https://digital.nhs.uk/supplementary-information/2024/malnutrition-admissions-by-provider-2009-10-to-2022-23>

It is estimated 8.5% of adults in the United Kingdom have diabetes. For people with type 2 diabetes, we estimate that 810,000 people achieved all three treatments targets, those being National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommended treatment targets for Hba1c (glucose control), blood pressure, and serum cholesterol, in 2020/21, which is the equivalent to 35.5% of people with type 2 Diabetes. Further information is available at the following link:

<https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/cardiovascular/data#page/>

In 2022/23, NHS England data shows that 214,000 hospital admissions were due to coronary heart disease. It is possible to estimate the number of people with some illnesses which can be partly attributed to diet related risk factors, including cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. NHS England estimates that approximately 1.9 million individuals in England have coronary heart disease, which is a component of cardiovascular disease. Further information is available at the following link:

<https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/cardiovascular/data#page/>

The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities estimates that approximately 4 million individuals in England have both type 1 and 2 diabetes, with further information available at the following link:

<https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/diabetes-ft/data#page/>

Estimates are also available on the proportion of cases or deaths from some illnesses which can be attributed to diet related risk factors. The Global burden of disease estimated that in England there were approximately 50,000 deaths attributable to diet related risk factors in 2021. Further information is available at the following link:

<https://vizhub.healthdata.org/gbd-results/>

Finally, Cancer Research UK estimates that 6%, or 23,000 out of 385,000, of cancer cases in the UK are attributable to obesity and overweight.

HC Deb 18 November 2024 | PQ 13770

### Nutrition: Obesity

Asked by: Snell, Gareth

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, whether his Department is taking steps with the food and drink industry to help tackle (a) poor diets and (b) obesity.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

From data collected through the National Diet and Nutrition Survey, the Government knows that, compared to dietary recommendations, people are generally consuming too much sugar, saturated fat, salt, too many calories, and not enough fruit, vegetables, or fibre. This contributes to many people having poor diets and the high levels of obesity seen in both children and adults.

The prevention of ill health is a priority for the Government, as is creating the healthiest generation of children. As the providers of the food and drink we eat, it is clear that the food industry has a key role in helping to improve the nation's diet. For this reason, the Government has already published its response to the consultation on restricting junk food advertising on television and online, putting the legislation on track, and is committed to banning the sale of high caffeine energy drinks to under 16-year-olds.

Other existing policies such as the legislated restrictions on the locations in supermarkets in which foods and drinks that are high in saturated fat, sugar, or salt can be promoted, and the voluntary reformulation programme, aim to encourage the food industry to make everyday food and drink healthier. Voluntary industry guidelines to reduce levels of salt and sugar in, and improve the marketing and labelling of, commercially available food and drink aimed at babies and young children aged up to 36 months, that form an additional workstream for the reformulation programme, are also expected to be published in the next month. The Department continues to review the balance between mandatory and voluntary incentives to help tackle poor diets and reduce obesity.

HC Deb 11 November 2024 | PQ 12440

### Infant Foods

Asked by: Johnson, Kim

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, if he will publish guidance on the sugar and salt content of baby foods.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

A 2019 evidence review showed that babies and young children are exceeding their energy intake requirement and are eating too much sugar and salt. Some commercial baby foods, particularly finger foods, had added sugar or salt, or contained ingredients that are high in sugar or salt.

More recently, the independent Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) highlighted in their report on Feeding Young Children aged 1-5 years, published in 2023, that free sugar intakes are above recommendations for children at all ages where recommendations have been set; and that commercial baby food and drinks contributed to around 20% of free sugar intake in children aged between 12 and 18 months old. SACN also recommended that in diets of children aged between one and five years old, foods, including snacks that are high in salt, free sugars, saturated fat, or are energy dense should be limited and that commercially manufactured foods and drinks marketed specifically for infants and young children are not needed to meet nutrition requirements.

We face a childhood obesity crisis, and the Government is committed to raising the healthiest next generation. We can therefore confirm that we will publish voluntary industry guidelines to limit the levels of salt and sugar in commercially available baby food and drink in the near future.

HC Deb 31 October 2024 | PQ 10507

### Infant Foods

Asked by: van Mierlo, Freddie

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, whether he has made a recent assessment of the potential merits of bringing forward regulations on the composition of (a) toddler and (b) other so-called growing up formula milks.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

The Government has not made a recent assessment of the potential merits of introducing legislation on the composition of 'toddler' or 'growing up'

milks. The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition's (SACN) 2023 report, called Feeding young children aged 1 to 5 years, reported findings from national dietary surveys indicating that free sugars intakes for children aged 18 to 60 months old were above the current recommendations. Furthermore, formula milks, mainly follow-on formula and 'toddler' and 'growing up' milks, were consumed by 36% of children aged one to one and a half years old, and contributed 50% of free sugars intakes in consumers.

Current recommendations from the SACN are that these products are not required by children aged one to five years old and that milk or water, in addition to breast milk, should constitute the majority of drinks given to children aged one to five years old. National Health Service advice is that there is no evidence to suggest that 'toddler' or 'growing up' milks provide extra nutritional benefits for young children.

We face a childhood obesity crisis, and the Government is committed to raising the healthiest generation of children ever, which includes considering what action is needed to improve the diets and associated health outcomes for children.

HC Deb 30 October 2024 | PQ 10561

### Food: Nutrition

Asked by: Cooper, Dr Beccy

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, whether his Department has made an assessment of the potential impact of improving access to healthy food on NHS waiting lists.

Answering member: Karin Smyth | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

Poor diet and obesity are major drivers of physical and mental ill health. No assessment has been made to date to specifically assess the impact of improving access to healthy food on National Health Service waiting lists, however shifting the focus from treatment to prevention is one of the three shifts for the Government's mission for an NHS fit for the future, and is a cornerstone of supporting people to live healthier lives.

HC Deb 24 October 2024 | PQ 9629

### Infant Foods: Nutrition

Asked by: van Mierlo, Freddie

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what discussions his Department has had on the impact of the nutritional labelling and packaging of infant and baby products on children's dietary health and consumption of excess (a) sugar, (b) salt and (c) fat.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

We face a childhood obesity crisis, and the Government is committed to raising the healthiest generation of children ever. The Department speaks with many stakeholders about its policies to improve the diets and associated public health outcomes for the population.

It is vital that labelling and packaging of infant and baby food products are accurate and honest, to support parents and carers to make the best choices for feeding their young children. This is why infant and baby food products are already subject to robust regulations which set nutrition, composition, and labelling standards.

HC Deb 23 October 2024 | PQ 9897

### Infant Foods: Nutrition

Asked by: van Mierlo, Freddie

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what assessment he has made of the potential merits of taking steps to improve the nutritional content of commercial baby food.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

A 2019 evidence review showed that babies and young children are exceeding their energy intake requirement and are eating too much sugar and salt. Some commercial baby foods, particularly finger foods, had added sugar or salt, or contained ingredients that are high in sugar or salt.

More recently, the independent Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) highlighted in their 2023 report, Feeding Young Children aged 1 to 5 years, that free sugar intakes are above recommendations for children at all ages where recommendations have been set. Furthermore, commercial baby food and drinks contributed to approximately 20% of free sugar intake in children aged 12 to 18 months. The SACN also recommended that in diets of children aged one to five years old, foods, including snacks that are high in

salt, free sugars, saturated fat, or are energy dense, should be limited. The SACN also recommended that commercially manufactured foods and drinks marketed specifically for infants and young children are not needed to meet nutrition requirements.

We face a childhood obesity crisis, and the Government is committed to raising the healthiest next generation ever. Under our health mission and shift to prevention, we are considering what action is needed to respond to the SACN's commercial baby food recommendations to establish healthy habits as early as possible.

HC Deb 23 October 2024 | PQ 9896

### Infant Foods: Health Education

Asked by: Chowns, Ellie

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, if he will make an assessment of the potential implications for his Department's policies of the report by the Food Foundation entitled Broken Plate Report 2023, published on 27 June 2023; and what steps he is taking to tackle misleading health claims on baby and infant food.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

We face a childhood obesity crisis, and the Government is committed to raising the healthiest next generation ever. It is vital that we maintain the highest standards for foods consumed by babies and young children and ensure that claims made about infant food or drink are accurate and not misleading. This will help to better support parents and carers to make the best choices for feeding their young children.

The independent Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN), for their 2023 report Feeding Young Children aged 1-5 years, recommended that foods, including snacks, that are high in salt, free sugars, saturated fat, or are energy dense, should be limited in the diets of children aged one to five years<sup>old</sup>, and that commercially manufactured foods and drinks marketed specifically for infants and young children are not needed to meet nutrition requirements.

This is why baby and infant foods are already subject to robust regulations which set nutrition and composition standards through the Processed Cereal-based Foods and Baby Foods for Infants and Young Children (England) Regulations 2003 and its parent Regulation (EU) No 609/2013 on food for specific groups.

Under our health mission and shift to prevention we are considering what further action is needed to respond to the SACN's commercial baby food recommendations, in order to establish healthy habits as early as possible. We will continue to keep these regulations under review to ensure they reflect the latest scientific and dietary guidelines.

HC Deb 22 October 2024 | PQ 9680

### School Meals: Processed Food

Asked by: Baroness Quin

To ask His Majesty's Government what consideration they have given to setting limits for the consumption of ultra-processed foods served in state schools.

Answering member: Baroness Smith of Malvern | Department: Department for Education

The School Food Standards regulate the food and drink provided at lunchtime and other times of the school day. The Standards aim to ensure that the right foods are available for children every day and restrict foods high in fat, salt and sugar, including high sugar foods and confectionery.

Diets high in calories and saturated fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) are associated with an increased risk of obesity and chronic diseases. Government dietary advice, based on recommendations from The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) and depicted within the Eatwell Guide, already shows that many foods that would be classified as ultra-processed are not part of a healthy, balanced diet as they are HFSS.

SACN has concluded that observed associations between ultra-processed foods and health are concerning, but it is unclear whether these foods are inherently unhealthy due to processing or due to their nutritional content.

The Ministerial team is working with departmental officials on plans to deliver manifesto commitments, including making quick progress to deliver breakfast clubs in every primary school. The department's aim is to deliver better life chances through a system which works for all. As part of this, and as with all government programmes, the department will keep its approach to school food under continued review.

HL Deb 21 October 2024 | PQ HL1299



### Infant Foods

Asked by: Smith, Rebecca

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, if his Department will publish voluntary industry guidelines on commercial infant and baby food and drink.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

The independent Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN), for their report on Feeding Young Children aged 1 to 5 years, published in July 2023, recommended that foods, including snacks that are high in salt, free sugars, saturated fat, or are energy dense, should be limited in the diets of children aged one to five years? old and that commercially manufactured foods and drinks marketed specifically for infants and young children are not needed to meet nutrition requirements.?

We face a childhood obesity crisis and the Government is committed to raising the healthiest next generation. Under our health mission and shift to prevention we are considering what action is needed to respond to the SACN commercial baby food recommendations to establish healthy habits as early as possible.

HC Deb 17 October 2024 | PQ 8737

### Food: Prescriptions

Asked by: Ribeiro-Addy, Bell

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, with reference to the Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper, published in February 2022, whether he is taking steps to implement the Community Eatwell pilot.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

The prevention of ill health is a clear mission for the Government, and the cornerstone of this is supporting people to live healthier lives. The Government is committed to creating the healthiest generation of children ever, as set out in our Child Health Action Plan. The Healthy Start scheme was introduced in 2006 to encourage a healthy diet for pregnant women, babies, and young children under four years old from very low-income households. It can be used to buy, or can be put towards the cost of, fruit, vegetables, pulses, milk, and infant formula. Healthy Start beneficiaries have access to free Healthy Start Vitamins for pregnant women and children aged under four years old.

The Government also encourages everyone to have a healthy balanced diet in line with the United Kingdom's Eatwell Guide. Further action on diet and obesity under the Government's Health Mission will be set out in due course.

HC Deb 17 October 2024 | PQ 8470

### Food: Advertising

Asked by: Cooper, Dr Beccy

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what assessment he has made of the potential impact of physical advertising for unhealthy food products on levels of child obesity.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

No assessment has been made of the potential impact of outdoor physical advertising for less healthy food and drink products on levels of child obesity. However, the Government welcomes recent action at a local level to ban junk food marketing across public transport networks and public spaces that are controlled locally.

Supporting people to stay healthier for longer is at the heart of the Government's Health Mission. This includes taking bold action to tackle the childhood obesity crisis and create the healthiest generation of children ever.

The Government has committed to implementing the advertising restrictions set out in the Communications Act 2003 on less healthy food and drink products without further delay. The regulations introduce a 9:00pm watershed for the advertisement of less healthy food or drink products on television, and a total restriction of paid-for advertising of these products online, which will come into force United Kingdom-wide on 1 October 2025.

Evidence shows that these restrictions will have a direct impact on childhood obesity by reducing children's exposure to advertising of less healthy products. We estimate that these restrictions will remove up to 7.2 billion calories from children's diets per year in the UK, and reduce the number of children living with obesity by 20,000.

HC Deb 16 October 2024 | PQ 8601

### Food: Advertising

Asked by: Dickson, Jim

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, whether his Department has had recent discussions with relevant stakeholders on the potential merits of regulating the outdoor advertising of high fat, salt and sugar products.

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of outdoor advertising of food and drink products that are high in fat, salt and sugar on children's consumption of those products.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

Departmental officials engage with a range of external stakeholders on diet and obesity policies. Supporting people to stay healthier for longer is at the heart of the Government's Health Mission which aims to reduce the amount of time spent in ill health, tackle health inequalities and drive economic growth. This includes taking bold action to tackle the childhood obesity crisis and create the healthiest generation of children ever.

The Government welcomes recent action at local level to ban junk food marketing across the public transport networks and public spaces that are controlled locally.

Whilst no assessment has been made on the potential impact of outdoor advertising of less healthy food and drink products on children's consumption of those products, the Government has committed to implementing the advertising restrictions set out in the Communications Act 2003 on less healthy food and drink products without further delay. The regulations introduce a 9pm watershed for the advertisement of less healthy food or drink products on television and a total restriction of paid-for advertising of these products online will come into force across the United Kingdom on 1 October 2025.

Evidence shows that these restrictions will have a direct impact on childhood obesity by reducing children's exposure to advertising of less healthy products. We estimate that these restrictions will remove up to 7.2 billion calories from children's diets per year in the UK and reduce the number of children living with obesity by 20,000.

HC Deb 15 October 2024 | PQ 7667; PQ 7668

### Processed Food

Asked by: Cooper, Dr Beccy

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what steps he is taking to help reduce consumption of ultra-processed foods.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

As set out in the King's Speech, the Government will bring forward the necessary secondary legislation to ban junk food advertising to children and to stop the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to under 16-year-olds. We face an obesity crisis, and we will take action to tackle it head on, easing the strain on our National Health Service and creating the healthiest generation of children ever.

There is no universally agreed definition of ultra-processed foods (UPF), although NOVA is the most widely used classification system. NOVA categorises foods by how processed they are, rather than their nutritional composition.

In July 2023, the UK Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) published a position statement on processed foods and health, and concluded that observed associations between UPF and health are concerning, but it is unclear whether these foods are inherently unhealthy due to processing or due to their nutritional content. Given the SACN's concerns, they added the topic of processed foods and health to their watching brief and will consider it at their next horizon scan meeting in October 2024.

Government dietary advice, based on recommendations from the SACN, and as depicted within the Eatwell Guide, already shows that many foods that would be classified as ultra-processed are not part of a healthy, balanced diet as they are high in calories, saturated fat, salt, or sugar (HFSS). The Government's advice on healthy eating, including the Eatwell Guide's principles, are communicated through the NHS.UK website and the Government's social marketing campaigns such as Better Health, Healthier Families, and Start for Life.

As UPFs tend to be HFSS, they are also likely to be the focus of policies to reduce consumption of HFSS foods, including the regulations being brought forward to ban junk food advertising to children and stopping the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to 16-year-olds.

HC Deb 05 September 2024 | PQ 3616

### Processed Food

Asked by: Shannon, Jim

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, if he will take steps with the food industry to help reduce the calorie content of processed foods.

Answering member: Andrew Gwynne | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

The Government recognises that prevention will always be better, and cheaper, than a cure, and we will take preventative public health measures to tackle the biggest killers and to support people in living longer, healthier lives.

As suppliers of what we eat and drink, the food industry has a key role to play in supporting the health of the nation. The voluntary calorie reduction programme requires businesses in all sectors to reduce the level of calories in the everyday food we buy for consumption, in or out of the home. This delivers change that will enable consumers to eat more healthily, without having to change their usual diets. Processed foods in scope of the programme include pizzas, crisps, sandwiches, and ready meals.

Retailers and manufacturers are required to reduce calorie levels by 10%, and out of home businesses, including takeaway and delivery, are required to reduce calorie levels by 20%, against a 2017 baseline. Up to 25% of all adult energy intake is consumed out of the home, and foods and dishes served in the out of home sector generally contain double the levels of calories seen in similar products purchased in supermarkets, which is why they have a higher target.

The first progress report on the voluntary programme showed generally little change in calorie levels across all sectors and categories between 2017 and 2021, so it is clear that more needs to be done. The Government recognises that we face an obesity crisis and need to act. As set out in the King's Speech, the Government will bring forward the necessary secondary legislation to ban junk food advertising to children, and to stop the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to under-16-year-olds.

HC Deb 02 August 2024 | PQ 952

### Processed Food

Asked by: Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle

To ask His Majesty's Government what plans they have to help consumers to identify ultra-processed food, to encourage the consumption of healthy

food, and to reduce the percentage of ultra-processed food in the national diet.

Answering member: Baroness Merron | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

As set out in the King's Speech, the Government will bring forward the necessary secondary legislation to ban junk food advertising to children, and will stop the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to under 16-year-olds. We face an obesity crisis, and we will take action to tackle it head on, easing the strain on the National Health Service and creating the healthiest generation of children ever.

There is no universally agreed definition of ultra-processed foods (UPF), although NOVA is the most widely used classification system. NOVA categorises foods by how processed they are, rather than their nutritional composition.

Published evidence has estimated that UPF intake varies by age group, ranging from 51% in adults aged over 19 years old, to 68% in adolescents aged 12 to 18 years old, based on National Diet and Nutrition Survey data.

In July 2023 the UK Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) published a position statement on processed foods and health, and concluded that observed associations between UPFs and health are concerning, but it is unclear whether these foods are inherently unhealthy due to processing or due to their nutritional content. Given the SACN's concerns, they added the topic of processed foods and health to their watching brief and will consider it at their next horizon scan meeting in October 2024.

Government dietary advice, based on recommendations from the SACN and as depicted within *The Eatwell Guide*, already shows that many foods that would be classified as ultra-processed are not part of a healthy, balanced diet, as they are high in calories, saturated fat, salt, or sugar. Government advice on healthy eating, including *The Eatwell Guide* principles, is communicated through the NHS.UK website and the Government's social marketing campaigns such as Better Health, Healthier Families, and Start for Life.

HL Deb 30 July 2024 | PQ HL200

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## News items

Guardian

8 November 2024

[Tax unhealthy foods to tackle obesity, say campaigners](#)

Food Manufacture

30 October 2024

[Recipe for Health: Exclusive interview with Baroness Walmsley](#)

Guardian

28 October 2024

[Force food firms to disclose products' health ratings, industry boss urges](#)

FT [subscription required]

24 October 2024

['Misguided fears' of nanny state to blame for obesity crisis, peers warn](#)

Pulse

24 October 2024

[Fix 'broken food system' to tackle obesity crisis, says Lords report](#)

Times [subscription required]

24 October 2024

[Tax junk food instead of using Ozempic to solve obesity, say lords](#)

FT [subscription required]

29 September 2024

[Food businesses and investors call on UK government to tackle unhealthy diets](#)

Institute of Economic Affairs report

31 July 2024

[Calories Out: The Unintended Consequences of Food Reformulation](#)

Guardian

19 June 2024

[UK children shorter, fatter and sicker amid poor diet and poverty, report finds](#)

Imperial College

22 April 2024

[Taxing unhealthy food helps cut obesity, says global study](#)

Nesta blog

22 January 2023

[How reformulating foods could transform the nation's health](#)





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