



TOO GOOD TO REFUSE

Supermarket special offers are good for our wallets but at what price to our waistlines and health?

COUCHING PRICES as special offers helps supermarkets generate over £50 billion in sales and accounts for two-fifths of all spending and over half of all food items sold in UK supermarkets. Price promotions can offer tempting savings for consumers, but are they good for our waistlines and health? Is there a tendency for supermarkets to over-promote foods high in fat, sugar and salt and encourage excessive consumption? With a quarter of the population classed as obese, are special offers helping to fuel the UK's obesity epidemic?

Research led by Professor Paul Dobson, Head of Norwich Business School at the University of East Anglia, with Professor Eitan Gerstner of the Technion in Israel and Dr Jonathon Seaton of Loughborough University, addresses these questions with analysis of the nutrition of goods sold in major British supermarkets and the type of foods that are sold on promotion through price deals. Their research finds promotional bias towards unhealthy foods and particular concern about the types of food and drink sold with prominent deep discount offers.

THE BIGGEST TEMPTATIONS

The product categories that see the most price promotions are beverages and soft drinks, confectionery and sweets (tending to have high sugar levels), as well

as dairy, chilled and frozen foods (often high in fat and sugar) and snacks (often high in salt and fat). It is the promotional bias towards high sugar content products that stands out, where special offers are 20 per cent more likely to have red traffic light levels of sugar compared to non-offers. This is troubling because excessively eating highly calorific sugared products might not only lead to weight gain but could be associated with the onset of Type 2 diabetes, and other medical conditions associated with obesity like hypertension, heart disease and certain cancers. Consumers might be aware of sugar consumption through sweets, chocolate, ice cream and chilled desserts, they might be less aware of how much sugar is contained in fruit juices, yoghurts and sweetened milk drinks – all of which are very heavily price promoted.

The research finds that, with an average of 20 per cent of items on special offer at any given time, it is the

particularly prominent deep discounts that are most concerning in health terms. In particular, 'buy-one-get-one-free' (BOGOF) and other 'two-for-one' deals are heavily skewed towards less healthy products – being more than twice as likely to have red traffic light levels of fat and over 40 per cent more likely to have red traffic light levels of saturated fat and sugar than items as a whole.

Often the most frequently promoted products are high in combinations of concerning constituents such as fresh desserts and chocolate having high levels of both sugar and fat, and bacon, crisps and snacks, dips and fillers, and cheddar cheese with high levels of both salt and fat. Price promotions apply across almost all product categories – including fruit and vegetables and other fresh produce – so there is a healthy choice of offers available if consumers are prepared to shop carefully, check ingredients and fill their baskets for a balanced diet.

Recent industry agreement on a common standard for food labelling might help consumers with this task. But for shoppers in a rush, few will have the time or inclination to check the ingredients on every item. Instead they may find themselves drawn to the red-and-yellow offer signs where irresistible temptation lies.

With so much profit at stake, it would be unwise to think that voluntary agreement by supermarkets alone, even with government sponsorship through the Responsibility Deal, will be sufficient to rebalance the types of goods on special offer towards more healthy foods. More direct government pressure or intervention should not be ruled out. ■

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SPECIAL OFFERS
THE NEXT TIME YOU'RE TEMPTED BY A SPECIAL OFFER, THINK OF YOUR WAISTLINE FIRST

WHY SALT IS BAD FOR YOU

Salt can raise your blood pressure, which can increase risks of heart disease and stroke.

► Much salt is already in everyday foods, such as:

bacon, cheese, ham, yeast extract, pickles, prawns, soy sauce, gravy granules, salami, stock cubes, olives, smoked meat and fish

► You will also find varying levels of salt in the following foods, dependent on brand:

pasta sauces, crisps, pizza, ready meals, soup, sandwiches, sausages, breakfast cereals, tomato ketchup, mayonnaise, bread products such as crumpets, bagels and ciabatta

To keep an eye on how much salt you are eating in bought food, check the nutrition labels. Look at the figure for salt per 100g. High is more than 1.5g salt per 100g.

Source: www.nhs.uk