

ARE CHILDREN'S MEALS WORTH THEIR

SALT

Research into the nutritional quality of
children's meals in the out of home sector

May 2024

Salt Awareness Week

13 - 19 May 2024



ACTION ON SALT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It has become well known that poor diet is a leading cause of death and disability worldwide. Often, the focus has been on the health impacts of too much sugar and calories, which is linked to overweight and obesity and raises the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and thirteen types of cancers. Yet, regularly eating too much salt is also a public health concern, as it raises our blood pressure and increases the risk of suffering from strokes and cardiovascular disease, the leading causes of death in the UK and worldwide (1). And with 5 million people unknowingly living with high blood pressure in the UK...



Sonia Pombo, RNutr
Action on Salt Campaign Lead

...it's time for the spotlight to shine on salt.

Reducing salt in our diets is one of the quickest and most effective ways to reduce our blood pressure and improve our health. What we don't often realise is just how much salt we are eating because most of it is already in the food we buy. It is recommended that adults consume no more than 6g of salt a day, however we are currently consuming 40% more than this (8.4g/day) (2).

Regardless of our age, gender or ethnicity, we all stand to benefit from reducing our salt intake. The earlier we adapt to a lower salt diet, the less damage we create for our hearts, but unfortunately younger generations are increasingly being exposed to foods high in salt, sugar and calories, making these 'options' the norm. With blood pressure in children rising, it's clear that salt is not just an issue for older generations.

Salt reduction is a simple and cost-effective strategy to improve the health of our nation, and the benefits have been well documented and replicated worldwide. But despite an active voluntary salt reduction programme being in place in the UK since 2003, Government and food businesses have not done enough to ensure we have access to healthier foods lower in salt.

Relying on food businesses to voluntarily make the necessary changes for our health is a false ideology that is doomed for failure. Government holds the key to success and has the opportunity to make a real difference, through regulation, to create that much needed level playing field.

KEY FINDINGS

We've revisited the nutritional quality of food served to our children in the out of home sector (February – March 2024) and highlight the role that these businesses should play in offering our children nutritious meals. We looked at popular family friendly eating establishments with children's menus and found:

Access and Transparency

1. Three in four provide transparent nutrition information.
2. More than two thirds actively promote or encourage fruit and vegetables, either as symbols on menus or inclusion of veg in mains/sides.

Nutrition

1. Main dishes on average contain 415kcal, 14.8g fat, 4.4g saturated fat and 1.62g salt
2. Nearly one in three main dishes would provide more than a third of a child's recommended intakes for energy and saturated fat, with 49% providing more than half of a child's daily limit for salt.

Salt Reformulation

1. One in three children's meals exceed government maximum salt targets
2. Similar meals had varying levels of salt, depending on the establishment in question. This demonstrates feasibility in producing meals with less salt and should be prioritised in children's meals.
3. Efforts to improve the salt content of children's meals in the out of home sector have been made by some businesses, with children's meals on average 12% lower in salt since 2019. This however is inconsistent across the industry, with children's meals from 6 businesses increasing in salt.

INTRODUCTION

Our food environment influences what, how and when we eat and drink, with healthy food and drink commonly less accessible and affordable than less healthy alternatives. This has led many of us to consume a poor diet, one high in excess calories, free sugars, saturated fat and salt, and low in fibre, fruit and vegetables. It has a detrimental impact on our physical health, increasing our risk of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, tooth decay, heart disease, cancer and stroke, and our mental health, increasing the risk of depression, anxiety and low-self-esteem.

Processed and prepared food accounts for 75% of the salt we consume (3), and those that would be classified as high in fat, sugar and/or salt (HFSS) by the nutrient profile model, makes up two thirds of the calories consumed by families in the UK (4). Calorie for calorie, healthy food is two times more expensive than HFSS products, and the most deprived fifth of the population would need to spend 50% of their disposable income on food to meet the cost of the Government-recommended healthy diet, compared to just 11% for the least deprived fifth (5).

The reality of the unbalanced food environment we live in has meant children growing up in more deprived areas of the country are more than twice as likely to be living with obesity than those in higher income households and are therefore more at risk of food related illnesses in the future. Childhood is a critical time in influencing food preferences and developing a healthy relationship with a high nutrient-dense, minimally processed diet.

Despite this, unhealthy food is ever more readily available and accessible. The number of takeaway and fast-food restaurants have been steadily increasing over the past decade, with nearly 48,000 in 2023, predicted to increase to 49,500 in 2024 (6). Whilst there was a fall in the consumption of takeaways in 2020 due to the pandemic, it has since risen, and is now 50% higher than pre-pandemic levels (7).

Meals eaten out of the home, including takeaways, meals in pubs, restaurants and cafés, are typically higher in calories, saturated fat, sugars and salt, and like retailers and manufacturers, the out of home sector has been encouraged to work towards calorie, salt and sugar reduction targets to improve the nutritional content of the food they serve. However, the most recent sugar and calorie progress reports have shown very little progress by the out of home sector in reducing the amount of sugar and calories in their offerings. A progress report from the salt reduction programme is still yet to be released.

How salty we like our food is a learned preference, meaning we can become accustomed to the salty taste of foods being made available to us, but equally, it means we can adjust our taste buds to enjoy a low salt diet. To prevent children from developing a taste for salt in the first place, it is important to reduce the salt content in children's meals.

The nutrition content of children's meals has not been reviewed comprehensively by Action on Salt since 2019 (8). The aim of this report is to assess progress made by the out of home sector in meeting the 2024 salt reduction targets, highlight successful case studies of where salt content has been reduced successfully and assess progress made by the out of home sector in children's meals since 2019.



METHOD

Data Collection

We identified 37 large eating establishments with a children's menu available nationally across the United Kingdom; Ask Italian, Beefeaters, Bella Italia, Bill's, Brewers Fayre, Burger King, Byron Burger, Café Rouge, Carluccio's, Chiquito, Cote Brasserie, Frankie & Benny's, Gourmet Burger Kitchen, Giraffe, Harvester, Hungry Horse, Ikea, KFC, Las Iguanas, Leon, McDonald's, Miller & Carter, Nando's, Pizza Express, Pizza Hut, Pret a Manager, Prezzo, TGI Fridays, Slug and Lettuce, Subway, Toby Carvery, Wagamama, Wahaca, Wetherspoon, Wimpy, YO! Sushi and Zizzi. Where possible, children's menus were obtained online and full available nutritional information of savoury meal items, including starters, mains and sides were collected between February and March 2024 and shared with the companies for verification.

Business practices on the use or mention of vegetables on menus e.g. symbols noting '1 of your 5 a day' was recorded. The total energy (kcal), fat, saturated fat and salt content for starters, mains, sides and per complete main meal (main and sides where available) as intended for consumption was calculated for those with publicly available nutrition information. Where menus provided a choice of multiple sides, two entries were included in the dataset, one with the highest salt side dish and one with the lowest salt side dish, to demonstrate the variation in salt content.

Most establishments offered two or three courses for a fixed price e.g. starter, main and sides. The high and low salt variations of each meal was reported.

The establishment's progress towards achieving the maximum salt reduction target for 2024 was assessed.

Salt Content Over Time

In the research carried out in 2019, data was collected using similar methodology from 21 comparable eating establishments. The average salt content of children's menus was compared over time. Where possible, complete meals (mains with identical sides) were directly matched across both years, to make direct comparisons of salt over time.

RESULTS

Children's Menus

Out of 37 identified eating establishments with a children's menu, all had calorie information displayed on their menus, but only 29 provided additional nutrition information online. Of these, nineteen establishments provided the nutrition information on their website menus, whilst the remaining 10 provided separate downloadable nutrition tables elsewhere on their website. Only two (Hungry Horse and Wetherspoon) provided salt information on the menu at point of purchase.

The most popular main dishes were pasta, coated chicken/fish/vegetarian alternatives, burgers and pizzas. Vegetable sides were available in 75% of main dishes, often in combination with a starchy carbohydrate e.g. chips or mashed potatoes, or in place of.

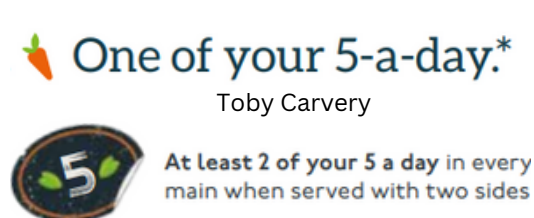
12 establishments actively promoted and encouraged the consumption of fruit and vegetables on their menu, with symbols and materials highlighting which menu items had 1 or 2 portions of a child's 5 a day recommendation. A further 13 establishments did not make a '5 a day' declaration but did provide fruit or vegetables (including baked beans) with the main dish by default (Appendix I).



Brewers Fayre



Harvester



Toby Carvery

Beefeater

Meal Deals

Of those surveyed, 33 out of 37 offered 'meal deals' as part of the children's menu. The majority of these deals included a starter, main, side, dessert and/or drink for a set price. Nearly two thirds (59%) of these establishments also offered promotional discounts during the school holidays (between 30th March and 14th April 2024), e.g. 'Kids Eat Free'.

While it is important to offer food to families at an affordable price, encouraging children to consume more food in this way will contribute to the excessive intake of calories, saturated fat and salt. For example, a meal from **Prezzo** *Gluten Free Kids Mini Garlic Bread with Mozzarella* (starter) and *Gluten Free Vegan Kids Pizza Pepperoni* (main) would contain 6.7g salt. For each establishment where set menus are available, examples of meals which are higher or lower in salt have been shown (Appendix II).

Nutrition Content

Starters

Eleven out of the 29 eating establishments that provided nutrition information included a choice of starters, ranging from 1 to 6 different options. On average, starters provided 189kcal per serve, 9.5g fat, 3.4g saturated fat and 0.87g salt but varied greatly between each eating establishment (Table 1).

Table 1. Simple average and range (min – max) in energy, fat, saturated fat and salt content of establishments with starters, sorted highest to lowest for salt content

| Establishment | Number of starters | Energy (kcal) per serve | Fat (g) per serve | Saturated fat (g) per serve | Salt (g) per serve |
|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Prezzo | 6 | 207 (150 - 295) | 13.0 (9.1 - 17.0) | 8.5 (1.0 - 28.0) | 1.42 (0.31 - 2.40) |
| Zizzi | 3 | 130 (96 - 177) | 3.6 (2.3 - 5.2) | 0.7 (0.4 - 1.1) | 1.39 (0.78 - 1.90) |
| Toby Carvery | 3 | 215 (204 - 231) | 5.6 (2.7 - 8.1) | 1.1 (0.5 - 2.2) | 1.29 (0.76 - 1.76) |
| ASK Italian | 1 | 261 | 7.4 | 0.9 | 1.20 |
| Miller & Carter | 6 | 245 (104 - 416) | 14.4 (5.4 - 24.9) | 4.2 (0.5 - 10.1) | 1.08 (0.42 - 1.91) |
| Pizza Express | 4 | 225 (194 - 248) | 9.7 (7.4 - 11.9) | 2.8 (0.6 - 5.0) | 1.03 (0.90 - 1.20) |
| Bella Italia | 5 | 246 (184 - 296) | 13.9 (8.9 - 18.0) | 4.3 (0.8 - 7.6) | 0.86 (0.50 - 1.20) |
| Café Rouge | 2 | 152 (135 - 168) | 8.0 (8.0 - 8.0) | 3.0 (3.0 - 3.0) | 0.50 (0.40 - 0.60) |
| Brewers Fayre | 6 | 131 (30 - 248) | 5.0 (0.3 - 10.0) | 1.0 (0.0 - 3.2) | 0.27 (0.10 - 0.60) |
| Beefeater | 3 | 132 (30 - 202) | 5.3 (0.3 - 9.2) | 1.4 (0.0 - 3.2) | 0.27 (0.10 - 0.40) |
| Hungry Horse | 3 | 119 (38 - 219) | n/a | n/a | 0.23 (0.00 - 0.60) |

The vast majority of starters on offer was bread-based (57%), available in all establishments, followed by vegetable-based (19%). Bread-based starters had on average 213kcal and 1.03g salt per serve, but varied greatly; for example, **Zizzi's Carrot, Cucumber & Soul Bread** contained 1.9g salt per serve, which had nearly 5 times more salt than **Café Rouge Baguette and Crudites, with Garlic Butter** at 0.4g per serve.

Side Dishes

Many establishments offered a selection of sides that customers could choose from to build their main meal. Some offered a choice of up to 2 sides, and often contained vegetables and/or a carbohydrate option e.g. rice or potatoes.

On average, side dishes provided 111kcal per serve, 4.2g fat, 0.7g saturated fat and 0.37g salt but varied greatly between each eating establishment (Table 2).

Table 2. Simple average and range (min - max) in energy, fat, saturated fat and salt content of side dishes in each establishment, sorted highest to lowest for salt content

| Establishment | Number of sides | Energy (kcal) per serve | Fat (g) per serve | Saturated fat (g) per serve | Salt (g) per serve |
|------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Gourmet Burger Kitchen | 2 | 190 (180 - 199) | 9.2 (9.1 - 9.3) | 1.0 (0.8 - 1.1) | 1.55 (1.00 - 2.10) |
| Las Iguanas | 7 | 76 (14 - 137) | 2.3 (0.1 - 6.2) | 0.3 (0 - 0.7) | 0.73 (0.00 - 2.20) |
| KFC | 8 | 133 (60 - 245) | 4.3 (0.7 - 12.9) | 0.7 (0.1 - 1.9) | 0.66 (0.01 - 1.33) |
| Pizza Hut | 4 | 163 (96 - 209) | 6.6 (3 - 9.3) | 1.1 (0.4 - 2) | 0.60 (0.00 - 1.30) |
| Nando's | 4 | 109 (16 - 224) | 3.6 (0.8 - 9) | 0.3 (0 - 0.7) | 0.45 (0.00 - 0.80) |
| Miller & Carter | 3 | 109 (68 - 178) | 4.8 (2.2 - 6.9) | 0.7 (0.2 - 1.2) | 0.43 (0.30 - 0.55) |
| Burger King | 1 | 219 | 11.0 | 3.9 | 0.40 |
| Frankie & Benny's | 9 | 124 (55 - 226) | 5.1 (0.2 - 13.7) | 1.0 (0.0 - 3.0) | 0.34 (0.00 - 0.70) |
| Toby Carvery | 2 | 50 (32 - 67) | N/A | N/A | 0.33 (0.05 - 0.6) |
| Slug and Lettuce | 8 | 108 (5 - 267) | 5.2 (0.1 - 15.8) | 1.3 (0 - 4.3) | 0.33 (0 - 0.6) |
| Zizzi | 3 | 192 (13 - 364) | 10.7 (0.2 - 21) | 1.0 (0.1 - 1.8) | 0.31 (0 - 0.7) |
| Bella Italia | 5 | 123 (21 - 266) | 5.5 (0.1 - 17.7) | 0.6 (0 - 1.5) | 0.28 (0 - 0.7) |
| McDonald's | 2 | 136 (34 - 237) | 6.1 (0.2 - 12) | 0.6 (0.1 - 1.1) | 0.26 (0.08 - 0.44) |
| Beefeater | 6 | 62 (16 - 110) | 1.6 (0.1 - 3.8) | 0.5 (0 - 2.3) | 0.25 (0.00 - 0.70) |
| Hungry Horse | 9 | 96 (24 - 204) | N/A | N/A | 0.24 (0.00 - 0.72) |
| Harvester | 9 | 125 (44 - 273) | 3.0 (0.6 - 7.2) | 0.3 (0.1 - 0.7) | 0.23 (0.01 - 0.45) |
| Wetherspoon | 6 | 131 (14 - 329) | 3.2 (0 - 13) | 0.3 (0 - 1) | 0.17 (0.00 - 1.00) |
| Brewers Fayre | 7 | 80 (16 - 155) | 1.7 (0.1 - 6.2) | 0.5 (0 - 2.3) | 0.17 (0.00 - 0.50) |
| ASK Italian | 3 | 12.7 (4 - 24) | 0.2 (0.1 - 0.3) | 0.1 (0 - 0.1) | 0.00 (0.00 - 0.01) |

The most common sides on children’s menus were vegetables, followed by chips and baked beans (Table 3). Chips, on average, were highest in overall salt content, followed by rice.

Table 3. Simple average and range (min – max) in energy, fat, saturated fat and salt content of side dishes, sorted highest to lowest for salt content

| Meal Category | Number of products | Energy (kcal) per serve | Fat (g) per serve | Saturated fat (g) per serve | Salt (g) per serve |
|---------------|--------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Sauce | 1 | 60 | 2.6 | 0.3 | 1.33 |
| Chips | 25 | 208 (110 - 364) | 9.8 (3.4 - 21.0) | 1.3 (0.3 - 4.3) | 0.63 (0.10 - 2.10) |
| Rice | 5 | 137 (86 - 225) | 2.2 (1.1 - 3.0) | 0.3 (0.1 - 0.5) | 0.60 (0.34 - 0.86) |
| Mashed Potato | 7 | 123 (82 - 180) | 3.6 (2.2 - 6.8) | 1.7 (0.2 - 3.0) | 0.60 (0.45 - 0.94) |
| Bread | 2 | 202 (178 - 226) | 8.7 (6.7 - 10.6) | 2.5 (2.0 - 3.0) | 0.50 (0.40 - 0.60) |
| Baked Beans | 11 | 64 (41 - 105) | 0.2 (0.0 - 0.7) | 0.0 (0.0 - 0.1) | 0.50 (0.00 - 0.80) |
| Vegetable | 42 | 51 (4 - 169) | 1.7 (0.0 - 12.9) | 0.3 (0 - 1.2) | 0.13 (0.00 - 2.20) |
| Noodles | 1 | 84 | 4.6 | 0.3 | 0.10 |

There was a difference in the salt content of similar side dishes between different eating establishments – for example **Gourmet Burger Kitchen’s** chips contained 2.1g salt per portion, whereas those from **Hungry Horse** contained 0.1g salt per portion. Similarly, a portion of mashed potatoes from **KFC** would provide 0.94g salt, compared to **Miller and Carter** which contained less than half the amount of salt, at 0.45g.

Complete Main Meals

Overall, 503 complete main meals (i.e. a main and accompanying high/low salt side dish, if applicable) from 29 popular eating establishments were included in this report. On average, complete main meals provide 415kcal, 14.8g fat, 4.4g saturated fat and 1.62g salt, but again, varied between eating establishments.

The average calorie content per complete main meal was highest in burgers (509kcal), followed by coated fish (469kcal) and sausage meals (461kcal). The energy content per complete main meal varied from 116 – 906kcal (Table 4).

The average saturated fat content per main meal was highest in sausage meals (7.7g) followed by pizza (5.8g), and meat and burgers (5.6g). The saturated fat content per main meal varied from 0.0g - 21.0g.

The average salt content per meal was greatest in pizzas (2.29g), followed by sausage meals (1.95g) and burgers (1.83g), with the lowest in uncoated fish dishes (0.79g) and meat dishes (0.87g). The salt content per main meal varied from 0.0g to 4.4g (Table 4).

Table 4. Simple average and range (min - max) in energy, fat, saturated fat and salt content of complete main meal type (including high/low salt side options), sorted highest to lowest for salt content

| Main Meal type | Number of meals | Energy (kcal) per serve | Fat (g) per serve | Saturates (g) per serve | Salt (g) per serve |
|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Pizza | 97 | 437 (258 - 712) | 13.2 (5.0 - 28.2) | 5.8 (1.0 - 12.2) | 2.30 (0.77 - 4.40) |
| Sausage | 25 | 461 (319 - 728) | 24.1 (13.5 - 47.5) | 7.7 (4.2 - 15.1) | 1.95 (0.84 - 3.59) |
| Burger | 61 | 509 (165 - 906) | 18.1 (4.8 - 38.9) | 5.6 (0.5 - 17.2) | 1.83 (0.70 - 4.20) |
| Noodles | 9 | 338 (219 - 439) | 12.5 (5.9 - 18.9) | 1.5 (0.7 - 3.0) | 1.58 (0.39 - 2.66) |
| Coated Fish | 32 | 469 (189 - 718) | 16.0 (4.5 - 45) | 2.1 (0.4 - 9.9) | 1.57 (0.50 - 3.60) |
| Chicken | 47 | 403 (169 - 693) | 12.8 (2.9 - 33.2) | 2.6 (0.5 - 9.6) | 1.47 (0.40 - 4.10) |
| Vegetarian | 25 | 341 (121 - 494) | 10.8 (1.0 - 20.9) | 2.1 (0.0 - 8.4) | 1.43 (0.40 - 4.00) |
| Coated Chicken | 37 | 368 (186 - 596) | 14.2 (5.2 - 32.9) | 2.5 (0.9 - 7) | 1.36 (0.30 - 3.70) |
| Coated Vegetarian | 30 | 377 (139 - 652) | 16.3 (5.1 - 37.5) | 1.7 (0.4 - 4.1) | 1.33 (0.12 - 3.50) |
| Pasta | 112 | 387 (116 - 782) | 13.9 (1.1 - 46) | 5.3 (0.1 - 21.0) | 1.31 (0.00 - 3.90) |
| Sandwich | 8 | 261 (147 - 396) | 7.2 (1.5 - 15.3) | 2.6 (0.3 - 7.4) | 1.16 (0.41 - 1.64) |
| Meat | 14 | 364 (127 - 638) | 17.1 (6 - 37.4) | 5.6 (2.0 - 12.2) | 0.87 (0.14 - 1.49) |
| Fish | 6 | 446 (307 - 613) | 23.3 (9.6 - 41.6) | 3.7 (1.1 - 6.1) | 0.79 (0.30 - 1.26) |
| Total | 503 | 415 (116 - 906) | 14.8 (1.0 - 47.5) | 4.4 (0.0 - 21.0) | 1.62 (0.00 - 4.40) |

Colour Coded Labelling

Colour coded labels are applied to packaged food and drink and are designed to help consumers see at a glance the essential nutrition information in the food they purchase (9). One in 5 (20%) complete main meals would have a red warning label for fat if the out of home sector applied front of pack colour coded labelling to their menus, and one in four (26%) would have a red warning label for saturated fat. Similarly, 34% of all main meals would have a red warning label for salt.

The thresholds for determining colour coded labels on food items are based on an adult's reference intake and are therefore not reflective of dietary guidelines for children, who require fewer calories, fats and salt in their diet. Considering Government recommendations, one in four (28%) of these complete main meals would provide more than a third of a child's (aged 4-6) recommended limit for saturated fat, with 8 meals providing an entire day's worth, or more (i.e. more than 17.1g). One in two (49%) of the complete main meals surveyed would provide more than half of a child's daily limit for salt, with 47 providing an entire day's worth, or more (10) (i.e. more than 3g). Worryingly, these figures only consider the main meal; coupled with starters, desserts and drinks, eating out will likely contribute to excessive levels of energy, fat, saturated fat and salt.

Salt content in children's meals

On average, children's meals in **Gourmet Burger Kitchen** had the highest average salt content (3.06g) followed by **Las Iguanas** (2.35g) (Table 5). **Subway** had the lowest salt content per meal (0.79g), followed by **Brewer's Fayre** (1.06g).

The saltiest set menu was **Prezzo's** *Gluten-Free Kids Mini Garlic Bread with Mozzarella* (starter) and *Gluten-free Vegan Kids Pepperoni Pizza* (main) containing 6.7g salt – more than double the daily limit for a child. This is in comparison to **Beefeater** where a similar meal of *Garlic Flatbread* (starter) and *Margherita Pizza, Cob Bites and Veg Batons* (Main) contains 1.8g salt.

Table 5. Simple average and range (min - max) in salt content of complete main meals (including high/low salt side options) for each eating establishment, sorted highest to lowest salt

| Establishment | Number of main dishes | Salt (g) per meal (range) |
|------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Gourmet Burger Kitchen | 8 | 3.06 (1.70 - 4.20) |
| Las Iguanas | 20 | 2.35 (0.50 - 4.10) |
| Prezzo | 25 | 2.28 (0.05 - 4.30) |
| Slug and Lettuce | 12 | 2.12 (1.30 - 3.00) |
| Nandos | 8 | 2.10 (1.00 - 3.00) |
| Pizza Hut | 24 | 2.03 (1.00 - 3.20) |
| Wetherspoon | 26 | 1.88 (0.00 - 3.00) |
| Bella Italia | 46 | 1.88 (0.30 - 4.40) |
| Pizza Express | 32 | 1.86 (0.60 - 2.70) |
| Leon | 4 | 1.83 (1.30 - 2.20) |
| Zizzi | 27 | 1.68 (0.80 - 2.70) |
| KFC | 6 | 1.63 (0.74 - 2.68) |
| Wimpy | 7 | 1.59 (1.10 - 2.30) |
| Pret a Manger | 4 | 1.54 (1.42 - 1.64) |
| Frankie & Benny's | 42 | 1.53 (0.30 - 3.20) |
| Hungry Horse | 25 | 1.49 (0.12 - 3.59) |
| Café Rouge | 5 | 1.44 (1.00 - 2.40) |
| YO! Sushi | 4 | 1.36 (1.26 - 1.62) |
| Burger King | 4 | 1.35 (1.20 - 1.70) |
| Miller & Carter | 20 | 1.27 (0.46 - 2.32) |
| Beefeater | 22 | 1.27 (0.30 - 2.00) |
| ASK Italian | 13 | 1.21 (0.01 - 3.77) |
| Wagamama | 18 | 1.17 (0.39 - 2.66) |
| McDonald's | 12 | 1.16 (0.46 - 2.14) |
| Toby Carvery | 20 | 1.14 (0.60 - 1.65) |
| Harvester | 38 | 1.12 (0.14 - 2.13) |
| Ikea | 5 | 1.08 (0.87 - 1.20) |
| Brewers Fayre | 22 | 1.06 (0.30 - 2.00) |
| Subway | 4 | 0.79 (0.41 - 1.00) |

Similar meals had varying levels of salt, depending on the establishment in question. For example, there was more than a 4-fold difference in salt content of sausage meals. Similarly, there was a 4-fold difference in the salt content of a fish and chips (Figure 1).

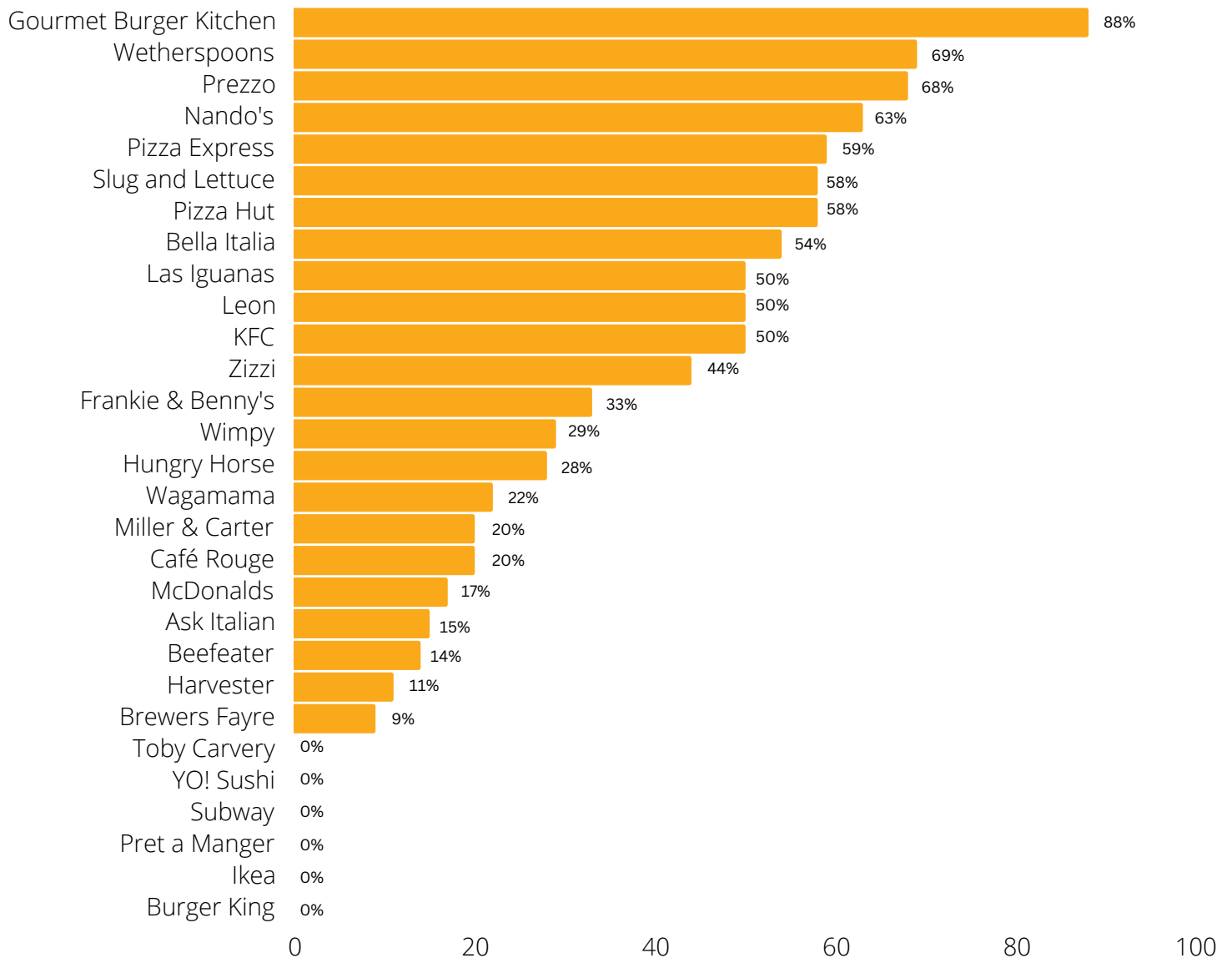
Figure 1. Examples of variation in salt content by meal type



2024 Salt Targets

Of the 503 complete main meals surveyed, 37% exceeded the respective maximum salt target (1.71g), with greater compliance in Quick Service Restaurants (Figure 2). Compliance to the salt target is not consistent across all businesses, with some providing children's meals that predominantly exceed the salt target. **Gourmet Burger Kitchen** had the lowest compliance, followed by **Wetherspoon** and **Prezzo**. Only six businesses (**Burger King, Ikea, Pret A Manger, Subway, Toby Carvery and YO! Sushi**) had all their children's meals below the salt target.

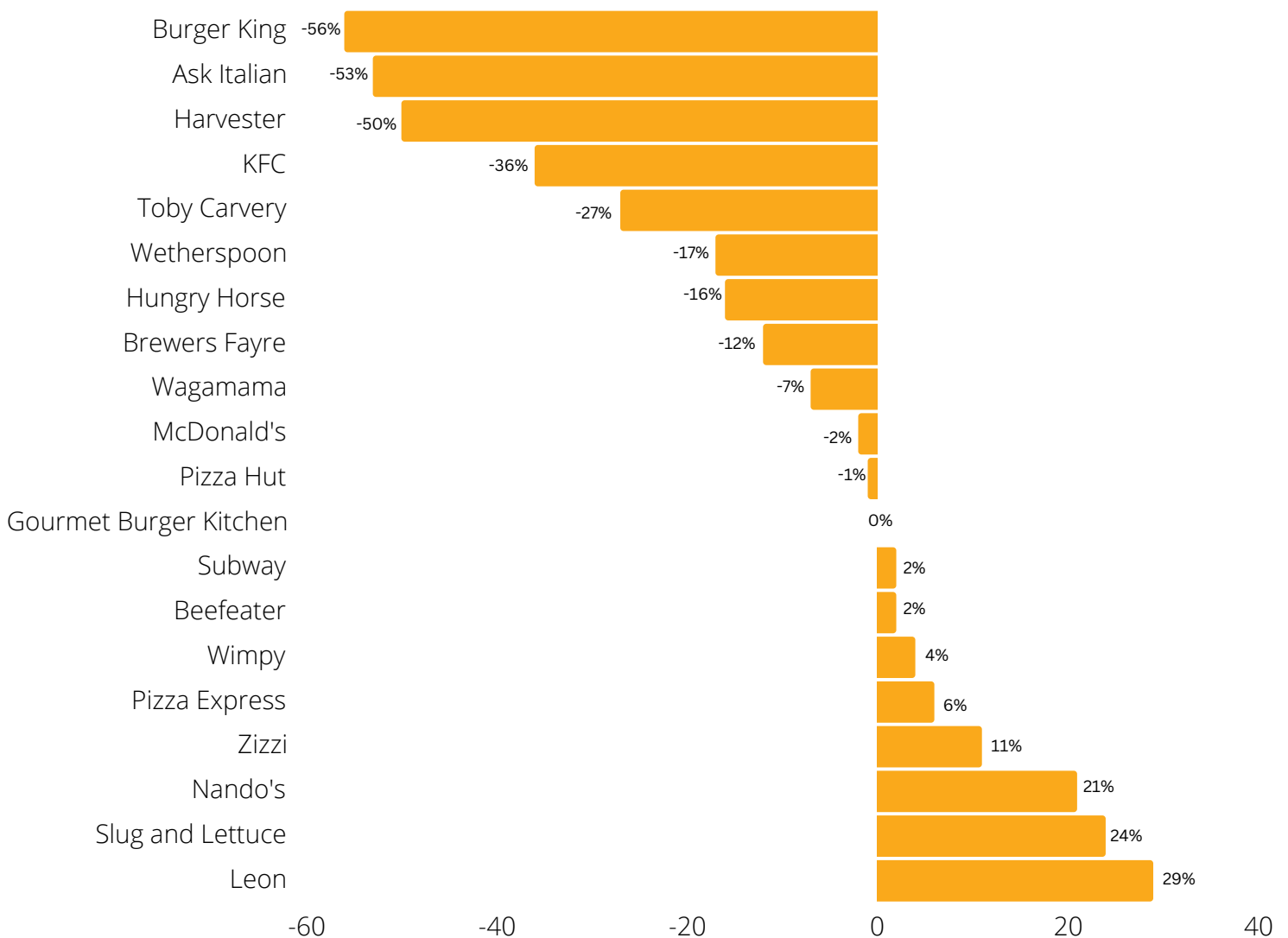
Figure 2. Proportion of children's meals which exceed the maximum salt target, by sector and company



Salt Content of Children's Meals Over Time

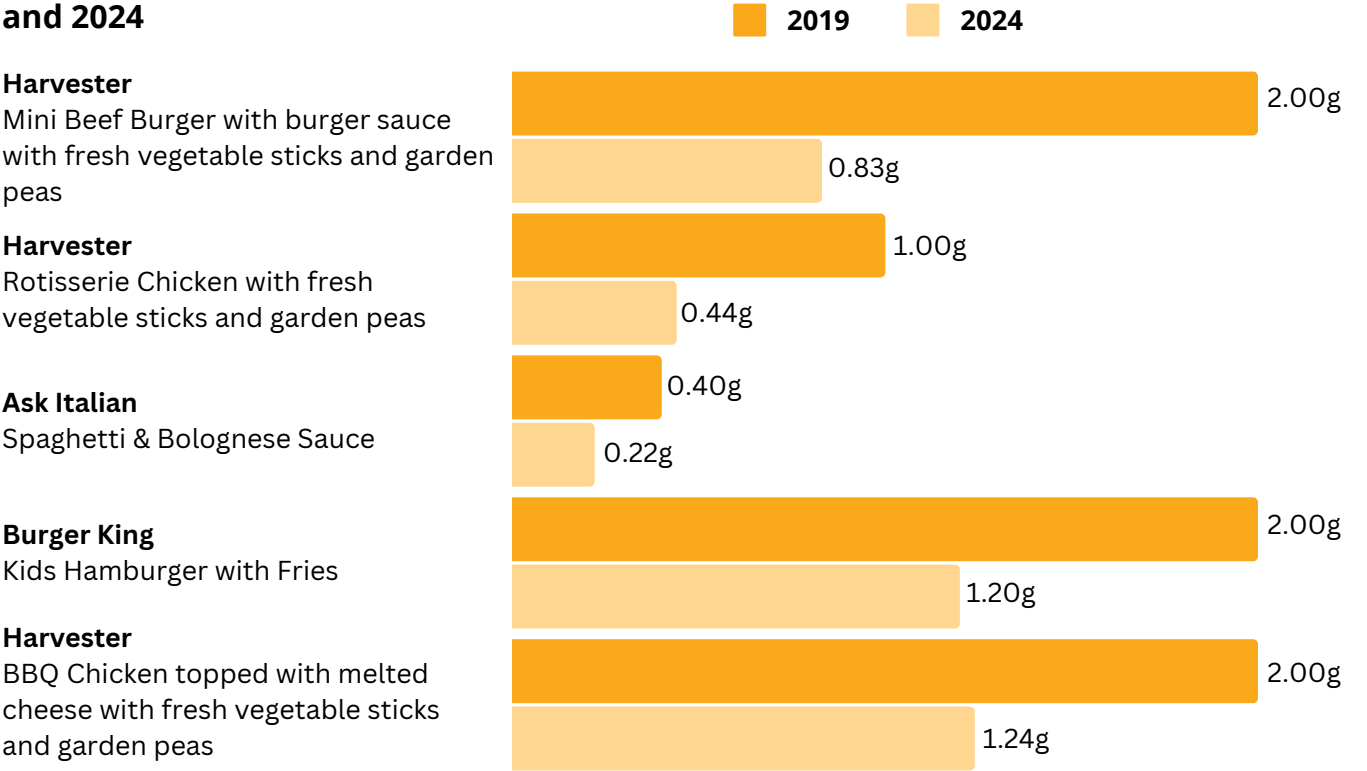
Comparing the salt content of children's meals in 20 eating establishments surveyed in both 2019 and 2024, the average salt content in 2019 was 1.73g compared with 1.54g in 2024, an overall reduction of 12%. The selection of children's meals available in the out of home sector now appear to be lower in salt, with 9 establishments having, on average, menus with at least 5% less salt than 5 years ago. Greatest reductions were reported in **Burger King, ASK Italian** and **Harvester**, with children's meals now containing ~50% less salt. Children's complete main meals in **Leon, Slug & Lettuce** and **Nando's** all reportedly have more than 20% salt on average, than 5 years ago (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Percentage difference of the average salt content of children's complete meals in 2019 and 2024, split by company



There were 72 identical meals that were directly matched across both years, with an average salt content of 1.49g per complete main meal in 2019, and 1.39g in 2024, representing a 7% decrease in salt content. Thirty-eight children’s meals had $\geq 5\%$ reductions in salt; the greatest reduction was seen in Harvester's Mini Beef Burger with burger sauce with fresh vegetable sticks and garden peas, with a 59% reduction from 2.00g to 0.83g (Figure 4). Contrastingly, the meal with the biggest reported increase in salt was Harvester’s Fish Fingers with fresh vegetable sticks and garden peas, 0g in 2019 and now 1.01g.

Figure 4. Examples of children’s meals with notable reductions in salt between 2019 and 2024



ENGAGEMENT WITH INDUSTRY

We contacted all 29 eating establishments included in this survey and asked them to comment on the salt content of their children's meals.

We received responses from 20 companies, all of which have expressed their commitment to offering healthy meals to children. Improvements have been made by certain eating establishments, since this research was conducted:

ASK ITALIAN

ASK Italian have confirmed they will review the salt levels in their pizzas to ensure they have a range of options that meet the guidelines



Beefeater are working through their children's nutrition policy and looking to see where they can make even more improvements on sugar, salt and calories in the next menu cycle later this year



Big Table Group (Cafe Rouge, Bella Italia, Frankie & Benny's, Las Iguanas) will continue to work with their suppliers to understand how they can keep improving the nutritional content of their food, whilst still delivering great flavours and value for money



Burger King will continue to make small incremental steps in salt reduction to ensure minimal impact on food safety, quality and consumer acceptability



Chiquito's have recently included full nutrition information on their menus online



KFC have decided to remove gravy as an optional side, which was the saltiest side available in their kid's meal



Las Iguanas have removed their two higher salt side dishes - broccoli which contained 2.2g and baked beans which contained 0.8g. This reduces the average salt content of their meals from 2.35g to 1.55g; 50% of their complete main meals still exceed the maximum salt target



Prezzo have had a seasonal menu change in May, reflecting some of the recent work they have made on salt reduction. Improvements have been made in the majority of their main meals, with average salt content now down from 2.28 to 1.72g. The proportion of children's meals exceeding the salt target has now fallen from 68% to 36%.



Slug & Lettuce (Stonegate) have reviewed their menu and made significant improvements in their May 2024 children's menu launch. Salt has been reduced in the following dishes:

Grilled Chicken Skewer - from 1.4g to 1.2g

Crispy Shredded Chicken - from 1.6g to 1.3g

Fish Goujons - from 1.8g to 0.9g

Their new menu will also signpost vegetable side dishes with a '1 of your 5 a day' classification.



Wetherspoon have stressed the importance of bringing customers on the same journey, and cite some challenges they face, including customer expectation on portion sizes and catering for different age ranges.

They have released a new children's menu with improvements to some of the dishes as summarised below.

Salt has reduced on the following dishes

- Chilli bean non carne (new replacement for the Five Bean Chilli) moved from 2.2g to 1.7g
- Chilli bean non carne jacket (new replacement for the Five Bean Chilli jacket) moved from 1.7g to 1.5g
- Margherita pizza- moved from 2.4g to 1.9g
- Ham & cheese pizza- moved from 3.1g to 2.6g
- Roasted vegetable pizza- 2.7g to 2.2g
- Vegan roasted vegetable pizza- 2.1g to 1.8g



Zizzi have committed to reducing outstanding dishes to target salt levels or below by their October menu launch.



Gourmet Burger Kitchen acknowledge the importance of government targets and are committed to further reducing salt and improving the nutritional content of our food.

They are committed to meeting government targets and continuously improving the nutritional content of our menu. To reduce salt content, they have made the following changes:

- We have reduced salt in both beef burgers and fries, which are served without salt seasoning on our children's menu dishes.
- Salt is not available on the table; guests are required to obtain it from the condiment station. This makes it more difficult to add salt at the table and, consequently, reduces salt consumption.
- The majority of salt within our meals comes from the bread bun. We are actively reviewing this product to reduce salt while maintaining its quality and safety.

Additionally, our new menu, currently on trial at GBK Trafford Centre in Manchester, offers our young guests further choice by allowing them to opt for a side salad instead of fries. This change further reduces the salt content by 0.5g per portion.

Improvements have been made in the majority of their main meals, with average salt content now down from 3.06g to 1.9g. The proportion of children's meals exceeding the salt target has now fallen from 88% to 75%.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

Government

- Employ mandatory regulation on salt, sugar and calorie levels in foods intended for child consumption.
- Introduce mandatory salt labelling on menus, to incentivise progress further and aid families in finding healthier options
- Release progress report on salt reduction without delay, for transparency.

Food Industry

- Reduce the salt content of children's meals to comply with the salt targets.
- Provide additional information on menus, including salt content and signposting to '1 of 5 a day'.
- Increasing offering of unsalted vegetables as side dishes in children's set menus or add as a default option to main meals.

Consumers

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



Eating too much salt damages our health. Did you know that 75% of the salt we eat is already in the food we buy?

Ask for less salt please!

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APPENDIX I

Complete list of eating establishments surveyed, grouped into different channels, with available information at time of data collection (February – March 2024).

| Outlet | School holiday promotion (April 2024) | Nutrition information available | 5 a day signposting on menu? | Fruit/Veg included in meal? |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Ask Italian* | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Beefeater* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Bella Italia | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Bill's | ✓ | | | |
| Brewer's Fayre* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Burger King* | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Byron | ✓ | | | |
| Café Rouge | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Carluccio's | | | | |
| Chiquito | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Cote Brasserie | | | | |
| Frankie & Benny's | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Gourmet Burger Kitchen* | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Giraffe | | | | ✓ |
| Harvester* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Hungry Horse* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Ikea | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| KFC* | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Las Iguanas | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Leon* | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| McDonald's* | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Miller & Carter | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Nandos* | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Pizza Express* | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Pizza Hut* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Pret a Manger | | ✓ | | |
| Prezzo | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Slug & Lettuce* | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Subway* | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| TGI Fridays | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Toby Carvery* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Wagamama* | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Wahaca | | | | |
| Wetherspoon* | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Wimpy* | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Yo! Sushi | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Zizzi* | | ✓ | | |

*Establishments also surveyed comprehensively in 2019 and included in comparison data

APPENDIX II

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

| Outlet | Dish | Part of dish | Salt content |
|----------------|---|--------------|--------------|
| Ask Italian | Vegetable sticks with bread soldiers and dip | Starter | 1.20 |
| | Happy face pizza, with ham & pepperoni | Main | 3.77 |
| | | | 4.97 |
| Ask Italian | Vegetable sticks with bread soldiers and dip | Starter | 1.20 |
| | Mini main pasta with butter | Main | 0.01 |
| | | | 1.21 |
| Beefeater | Garlic flatbread | Starter | 0.40 |
| | Garden gourmet sensational sausage & mash | Main | 1.70 |
| | Baked Beans | Side | 0.30 |
| | Peas | Side | 0.00 |
| | | | 2.40 |
| Beefeater | Veggie sticks & dip | Starter | 0.10 |
| | Spaghetti Bolognese | Main | 0.30 |
| | Cob bites | Side | 0.00 |
| | Veg batons | Side | 0.00 |
| | | | 0.40 |
| Bella Italia | Cheesy garlic bread | Starter | 1.20 |
| | Larger vegan margherita pizza | Main | 4.40 |
| | | | 5.60 |
| Bella Italia | Dough bites | Starter | 0.50 |
| | Larger gluten-free pasta with tomato sauce | Main | 0.50 |
| | Garden peas | Side | 0.00 |
| | Salad | Side | 0.00 |
| | | | 1.00 |
| Brewer's Fayre | Baked garlic & parsley flatbread | Starter | 0.60 |
| | Garden gourmet sensational sausages & mash | Main | 1.70 |
| | Baked beans | Side | 0.30 |
| | 2 corn on the cob bites | Side | 0.00 |
| | | | 2.60 |
| Brewer's Fayre | Veggie sticks | Starter | 0.10 |
| | Spaghetti Bolognese | Main | 0.30 |
| | Peas | Side | 0.00 |
| | Veggie sticks | Side | 0.00 |
| | | | 0.40 |
| Burger King | Kids cheeseburger | Main | 1.30 |
| | Fries | Side | 0.40 |
| | | | 1.70 |
| Burger King | Kids vegan chicken nugget | Main | 0.80 |
| | Fries | Side | 0.40 |
| | | | 1.20 |
| Café Rouge | Garlic Baguette | Starter | 0.60 |
| | Sausage and mash with peas, sweetcorn and gravy | Main | 2.40 |
| | | | 3.00 |
| Café Rouge | Baguette and crudites with garlic butter | Starter | 0.40 |
| | Macaroni Cheese | Main | 1.00 |
| | | | 1.40 |

| | | | |
|------------------------|---|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Frankie & Benny's | Cheesy Tomato Pizza with Ham Garlic Bread | Main Side | 2.30 0.60 |
| | | | 2.90 |
| Frankie & Benny's | Mini Baked Salmon Broccolini | Main Side | 0.30 0.00 |
| | | | 0.30 |
| Gourmet Burger Kitchen | Junior Cheeseburger Junior Skinny Fries | Main Side | 2.10 2.10 |
| | | | 4.20 |
| Gourmet Burger Kitchen | Junior Chicken Tenders Junior Chunky Skin-on-Fries | Main Side | 0.70 1.00 |
| | | | 1.70 |
| Harvester | BBQ Chicken Chips Golden Rice | Main Side Side | 1.19 0.40 0.38 |
| | | | 1.97 |
| Harvester | 4oz Rump Steak Corn Cob Garden Peas | Main Side Side | 0.12 0.01 0.01 |
| | | | 0.14 |
| Hungry Horse | Garlic Bread Quorn™ Sausages Mashed Potato Baked Beans | Starter Main Side Side | 0.60 2.73 0.63 0.72 |
| | | | 4.68 |
| Hungry Horse | Mini Corn on the Cob Impossible™ Nuggets Peas Chips | Starter Main Side Side | 0.00 0.02 0.00 0.10 |
| | | | 0.12 |
| KFC | Kids Burger Regular Gravy | Main Side | 1.35 1.33 |
| | | | 2.68 |
| KFC | Small Popcorn Chicken Corn Cobette | Main Side | 0.73 0.01 |
| | | | 0.74 |
| Las Iguanas | Chicken Wacky Tacos Baked Beans Broccoli | Main Side Side | 1.10 0.80 2.20 |
| | | | 4.10 |
| Las Iguanas | Veggie Nuggets Sweetcorn Mixed Salad | Main Side Side | 0.50 0.00 0.00 |
| | | | 0.50 |
| McDonald's | Kids Cheeseburger Small Fries | Main Side | 1.70 0.44 |
| | | | 2.14 |
| McDonald's | Kids Chicken McNuggets (4 pieces) Carrots | Main Side | 0.38 0.08 |
| | | | 0.46 |
| Miller & Carter | House Nachos Quorn Bites served with Peas Fries | Starter Main Side | 1.91 1.81 0.55 |
| | | | 4.27 |

| | | | |
|-----------------|--|---------|------|
| Miller & Carter | Vegetable Sticks & Houmous Chargrilled Chicken & Vegetables Mixed Salad | Starter | 0.42 |
| | | Main | 0.39 |
| | | Side | 0.30 |
| | | | 1.11 |
| Nando's | Chicken Wings Chips Spicy Rice | Main | 1.30 |
| | | Side | 0.70 |
| | | Side | 0.80 |
| | | | 2.80 |
| Nando's | Chicken Breast Corn on the Cob Long Stem Broccoli | Main | 0.70 |
| | | Side | 0.00 |
| | | Side | 0.30 |
| | | | 1.00 |
| Pizza Express | Piccolo Dough Balls Gluten Free with Houmous La Reine | Starter | 1.20 |
| | | Main | 2.70 |
| | | | 3.90 |
| Pizza Express | Piccolo Dough Balls with Garlic Butter Bianca Pasta | Starter | 0.90 |
| | | Main | 0.60 |
| | | | 1.50 |
| Pizza Hut | Mac 'n' Cheese Fries | Main | 1.90 |
| | | Side | 1.30 |
| | | | 3.20 |
| Pizza Hut | Spaghetti Bolognese with Cheese Mini Corn on the Cob | Main | 1.00 |
| | | Side | 0.00 |
| | | | 1.00 |
| Prezzo | Gluten Free Kids Mini Garlic Bread with Mozzarella Gluten Free Vegan Kids Pizza Pepperoni | Starter | 2.40 |
| | | Main | 4.30 |
| | | | 6.70 |
| Prezzo | Kids Vegetable Sticks with Houmous Gluten Free Kids Fusilli Butter | Starter | 0.31 |
| | | Main | 0.05 |
| | | | 0.36 |
| Zizzi | Carrot, Cucumber & Soul Bread Kids Penne Pesto Rosso | Starter | 1.90 |
| | | Main | 2.70 |
| | | | 4.60 |
| Zizzi | Carrot, Cucumber & Pasta Crisps Tiny Non Gluten Pomodoro Pasta | Starter | 0.78 |
| | | Main | 0.80 |
| | | | 1.58 |
| Slug & Lettuce | Fish Goujons Baked Beans Hash Browns | Main | 1.80 |
| | | Side | 0.60 |
| | | Side | 0.60 |
| | | | 3.00 |
| Slug & Lettuce | 2 Jolly Hog Pork Sausages Baby Corn Garlic and Basil Noodles | Main | 1.20 |
| | | Side | 0.00 |
| | | Side | 0.10 |
| | | | 1.30 |
| Toby Carvery | Mini Prawn Cocktail Sausages & Yorkshire Pud Baked Beans | Starter | 1.76 |
| | | Main | 1.05 |
| | | Side | 0.60 |
| | | | 3.41 |
| Toby Carvery | Garlic Bread Mini Birds Eye Green Cuisine Veggie Fingers Veggie Sticks | Starter | 0.76 |
| | | Main | 0.55 |
| | | Side | 0.05 |
| | | | 1.36 |

About Action on Salt

Action on Salt is a group concerned with salt and its effects on health, supported by 22 expert scientific members. Action on Salt is successfully working to reach a consensus with the food industry and Government over the harmful effects of a high salt diet and bring about a reduction in the amount of salt in processed foods as well as salt added to cooking, and at the table.

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