

Third year of industry progress to reduce sugar published

Public Health England (PHE) has published [new data](#) showing how much progress the food and drink industry has made in reducing sugar in products that contribute most to children's sugar intakes.

The voluntary ambitions are set by government and form a vital part of measures to tackle obesity by making healthier choices easier and more accessible for families.

Consuming too much sugar can lead to weight gain with most adults and children in England consuming more than double the maximum recommended daily amount. Two-thirds of adults are overweight or obese and 1 in 3 children are overweight or obese by the time they start secondary school.

Tackling obesity is an urgent national priority with growing evidence that being heavily overweight can increase people's risk of serious illness from coronavirus (COVID-19). Each year, the NHS spends an estimated £6.1 billion treating overweight and obesity related ill-health.

In 2016, the food and hospitality industry were challenged by government to reduce sugar by 20% in foods that contribute most to children's sugar consumption, as part of efforts to tackle obesity.

Achieving this ambition can happen through reformulating products to reduce sugar levels, reducing portion size or shifting consumer purchasing towards lower sugar products.

The [latest report](#) shows mixed progress across a range of food categories and sectors:

- retailer and manufacturer branded breakfast cereals and yogurts and fromage frais have seen some of the biggest falls in sales weighted average sugar – around 13% – between the baseline (2015) and year 3 (2019)
- sugar levels in chocolate and sweet confectionery are relatively unchanged, while product sales have increased, growing 16% and 7% respectively between 2015 and 2019
- average overall sugar reduction across all food categories stands at 3%

The latest report also finds that marginal progress has been made in reducing sugar in products purchased and consumed in the eating out of home sector, such as cakes and puddings purchased from restaurants or cafes, although calories in these products have declined.

Sugar reduction progress is reported by PHE for the first time for unsweetened juices including smoothies and sweetened milk based drinks, such as milkshakes. These were added to the voluntary programme, in 2018, as they can contribute significantly to children's sugar and calorie consumption.

Most retailer and manufacturer branded drinks have reduced sugar levels by at least 10% already with pre-packed sweetened milk based drinks reducing sugar by more than a fifth (22%).

The report also highlights the success of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) with average sugar levels in drinks subject to the levy falling by 44% between 2015 and 2019 for retailers and manufacturers. Overall, sugar consumed through these products has fallen even as sales have increased.

Jo Churchill, Public Health Minister, said:

“On sugar reduction, particularly in products like breakfast cereals, yogurts and ice cream, we have achieved some much needed progress. This will make it easier for everyone to make healthier choices, but it’s clear more can be done.

“COVID-19 has highlighted obesity and how important it is to tackle it. Our recent announcement of the obesity strategy includes world-leading measures, such as a TV watershed for advertising food and drinks high in fat, salt and sugar, and consulting on how we can introduce a ban online. If more action is needed to support individuals to lead a healthy life, we will go further to help them.”

Dr Alison Tedstone, Chief Nutritionist at PHE, said:

“Too much sugar is bad for our health and most of us are consuming more than we need, often without realising it.

“We’ve continued to see some progress in reducing sugar in a number of everyday food and drink products and this shows that success is possible through reformulation.

“Yet, overall progress remains too slow. Faster and more robust action is needed to help us consume less sugar, which will help us become healthier and lower the economic burden of obesity and preventable pressure on the NHS.”

The sugar reduction programme is one of a range of government commitments to support children and families to reduce sugar intake. This includes advertising restrictions and ending promotional deals on unhealthy food high in salt, sugar and fat as well as calorie labelling at large restaurants, cafes and takeaways.

PHE will continue to provide expert advice to government on the potential levers to address excess sugar consumption. The government is committed to further action if progress is not made.