

An analysis of the nutritional value of UK supermarket ready meals

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Ready meals have arguably become an established and habitual part of the UK mealtime, fueled by societal perceptions of time scarcity⁽¹⁾, loss of cooking skills⁽²⁾ and a desire for convenience⁽³⁾. Previous nutritional analysis has indicated supermarket own brand ready meals were high in saturated fat and salt, and low in sugar⁽⁴⁾. The aim of this study was to provide an updated nutritional analysis of brand and own-brand ready meals available in UK supermarkets.

A systematic analysis of chilled and frozen, branded and own brand ready meals from 10 selected UK supermarket websites was conducted in June 2019. Information on the nutritional composition (energy, carbohydrate, fat, saturated fat, protein, sugar and salt) per 100 g and per serving, price and front of pack (FoP) traffic light labeling was recorded across four ranges; luxury, healthy, standard and value.

1681 ready meals were included in the analysis across all 10 supermarkets. The median nutritional composition of ready meals analysed contained per serving; 434 Kcal, 14.8 g fat, 5.0 g saturated fat, 7.7 g sugar and 1.8 g salt. The median front of pack (FoP) labeling was recorded as amber (medium) for fat and salt with green (low) for saturated fat and sugar. Nearly half (46%) of all ready meals recorded a green (low) rating for one of the FoP nutrients (fat, saturated fat, sugar or salt) but only 6% of all ready meals were rated green (low) for all 4 FoP nutrients. Healthy range meals were reported to be green (low) in fat, saturated fat and sugar however amber (medium) for salt. In contrast, luxury meals were rated red (high) for fat, saturated fat, salt but green (low) for sugar. Ready meal prices were recorded as a median £2.55 with a range of £0.90 (value) to £4.25 (luxury). Meals weighed a median of 400 g each.

The current ready meal analysis recorded front of pack (FoP) reductions in saturated fat (Red - Green) and salt (Red - Amber) when compared to previous research (4). The nutritional profile of the current ready meals analysed varied significantly between categories, with luxury meals reporting the highest values for fat, saturated fat and salt. Despite recording a median reduction in saturated fat and salt across all ready meals, food producers should further improve the nutritional profile of their products, specifically focusing on reducing the salt content across the full range of ready meals available to consumers. This action will likely contribute to a reduction in salt consumption in the diet.

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