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A NUTRITIONAL ANALYSIS OF

SNACK BARS

A call for stronger food policies



Overview

The average sugar intake in the UK population remains substantially above recommended levels, while 'healthy' snack bars - including cereal, fruit, oat, nut-based and snack bars with "protein" claims continue to gain prominence in both consumer diets and the wider marketplace. Around one-fifth of UK consumers eat a protein bar at least once per week, rising to 54% among those aged 25–34.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the nutritional composition of snack bars currently available across the UK retail market. Based on a detailed review of 458 snack bars from 10 major retailers, this study provides critical insights into the contribution of these products to calorie and sugar intake, as well as broader dietary factors. Notably, nearly two-thirds (64%) were classified as 'less healthy' under the Government's Nutrient Profiling Model (NPM), and over half (55%) were high in saturated fat, 37% high in sugars and only 28% were low in sugars according to UK front-of-pack labelling thresholds. When assessed against warning labels used in Chile, 68% would carry a "high in sugar" warning. Among all products collected, the average sugar content was 7g per serving – up to one-third (29%) of a 7–10-year-old's daily recommended intake.

Action on Salt and Sugar is calling on the UK Government to take urgent action to protect children's health by introducing a clear set of policy measures to drive meaningful change in the food industry. The government need to use taxation as a tool for progress, building on the success of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy by introducing targeted levies on foods high in fat, salt, and sugar to encourage reformulation and guide consumers towards healthier choices. The government should also mandate use of front-of-pack labelling, requiring clear and consistent colour-coded or warning labels on all food and drink products, including those sold out of home, so that consumers can easily identify unhealthy options. Furthermore, the Government must press for greater transparency from large food businesses through mandatory healthy-sales reporting and the setting of ambitious targets to reduce salt, sugar, and calorie content across the sector. This should happen while updating the NPM, which has remained largely unchanged for over 15 years, to ensure it reflects current nutritional science, considers portion sizes, and supports all UK food policies. Lastly, the government must place stricter regulations on misleading health and nutrition claims, ensuring that only genuinely healthy products low in salt, sugar, and saturated fat can carry such labels, thereby ending the "health halo" effect that often misleads shoppers.

Government Recommendations

Introduce fiscal levers to drive reformulation

We urge the Government to introduce targeted levies on food and drink high in fat, salt and sugars, including those sold out of home, building on the proven success of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy. Such a levy would incentivise reformulation, shift purchasing behaviour towards healthier options, and generate revenue that could be reinvested into prevention, public health initiatives, and equitable access to nutritious foods. A levy would also level the playing field for responsible food businesses that have already taken steps to reduce unnecessary salt and sugar.

Mandate front-of-pack nutrition labelling

The UK's current voluntary system is widely recognised and trusted by consumers, but more than 10 years on, it remains inconsistently applied, and not applicable to food and drink sold out of home [1]. In 2020, the Government reviewed the front-of-pack nutrition labelling system via an open consultation but did not publish the outcome. We need a mandatory labelling system on all food and drink products to better inform consumers and drive reformulation. This system should be aligned with the latest public health recommendations on free sugars intake and be regularly reviewed against the latest global evidence base. Clear colour-coded or warning labels will ensure a level playing field, support informed consumer choice and encourage industry-wide reformulation.

Mandate healthy sales reporting and set stringent targets

We strongly support the introduction of mandatory reporting on the healthiness of sales for food and drink businesses. To be meaningful, reporting must be comprehensive, across a wide range of food and drink, with a consistent set of indicators that capture nutrients of concern, particularly salt and sugars, as well as positive indicators such as fibre and fruit and vegetable sales.

We also encourage the Government to set clear, time-bound healthy sales targets, linked to wider reformulation and marketing policies, to ensure sustained progress towards improving the nutritional quality of the UK food supply. Data should be transparent, comparable, and allow for accountability across the sector.

Whilst mandatory reporting and target setting are in development, government should continue to instruct businesses to comply with the reformulation programmes for salt, sugar and calories.

Update the Nutrient Profiling Model

We welcome the Government's commitment to update the NPM. This is long overdue, but important to ensure UK food and nutrition policy reflects current scientific evidence and dietary guidance. The current model, now over 15 years old, no longer captures the latest evidence on diet-related disease prevention. It also lacks provisions for portion size, which is particularly important in the out-of-home sector, where single-serve items often exceed recommended limits.

Restrict health and nutrition claims to low salt, sugar and fat products

We urge the Government to restrict the use of health and nutrition claims to only healthy products. Consumers are often faced with misleading claims on packaging, that create a "health halo" effect, masking less favourable nutrient profiles. Stronger regulation is needed to ensure that only genuinely healthier products can make such claims, helping consumers make informed choices and encouraging manufacturers to reformulate across all nutrients of concern.

Background

Snack bars have become a staple in the UK snacking environment. Their convenience and positioning as a 'better alternative' [2] to confectionery mean they frequently fill the gap between meals or serve as a grab-and-go snacking option [3]. In 2024, the snack bars and breakfast biscuits market was valued at over £700 million [2], and the appeal is especially strong among younger adults, with data suggesting around one-fifth of UK consumers eat a protein bar at least once a week, rising to 54% among those aged 25–34 [4]. Biscuits and cereal bars collectively contribute approximately 5% of total sugar intake in children aged 4–18 years [5]. The positioning of snack bars as a better choice than confectionery is reinforced through marketing, packaging and placement of these products, strengthening the perception of a healthier snacking option.

However, their perceived healthiness does not always align with nutritional reality. Our 2021 study, in collaboration with BiteBack, found 8 in 10 young people believed cereal bars were a healthy choice, despite 81% of these products receiving at least one red warning label on front-of-pack [6].

Recent years have seen manufacturers of snack bars increasingly targeting non-HFSS compliance, allowing them to access premium supermarket placement in impulse aisles, responding to consumer demand for healthier options [7]. The packaging claims commonly found on snack bars, such as "high protein", "no added sugar", "source of fibre", or "natural ingredients", contribute to a 'health halo' effect, whereby consumers infer greater health benefits than the product actually delivers. However, "no added sugar" does not guarantee low sugar content, and a "high protein" claim can still be accompanied by excessive calories or sugars.

Across the UK population, average calorie intake continues to exceed recommended levels, contributing to high rates of overweight and obesity and increasing the risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, certain cancers [8] and preventable dental decay - the leading cause of hospital admissions among children in the UK [9]. Sugar intake remains above recommended limits across all age groups, with children aged 4–18 years consuming almost twice the maximum limit for free sugars. Saturated fat intake also remains above the recommended limit of 10% of daily energy intake, while most adults fail to meet the recommended 30g daily intake of fibre [10].



In response to growing evidence linking excessive sugar consumption to childhood obesity, type 2 diabetes, and tooth decay - all major public health concerns - the UK Government implemented a voluntary sugar reduction programme in 2017 [11] aimed at encouraging food businesses to reduce the sugar content across a wide range of products. The programme sets specific sugar reduction guidelines for food categories that contribute most to children's sugar intake, including biscuits, with cereal and energy bars included within this category. These guidelines can be achieved through product reformulation, smaller portion sizes, and shifting consumers to lower sugar products. The 20% sugar reduction guideline set for biscuits was 26.2g per 100g, with a maximum portion calorie guideline of 325kcal per serve. The latest report of the sugar reduction guidelines showed the biscuit category achieved only a 3.1% reduction in sugar per 100 g from 2015 to 2020 [12], far short of the 20% guideline, demonstrating the limited success of voluntary reformulation alone.

Overall findings

This report presents a detailed analysis of the nutritional composition of snack bars available in England. Snack bars included cereal, fruit, nut, oat-based and bars with protein claims available for purchase in major retailers across England. Comparisons were made against several government initiatives designed to improve the nutritional quality of food and nutrition labelling criteria. Further details of the methodology and inclusion criteria can be found in the Annex.

Nutrition Content

A total of 458 snack bars were collected and assessed. The average energy content was 405kcal per 100g and sugars 18g per 100g, with snack bars with protein claims containing lower energy and sugars. On average, slightly less saturated fat and salt content per 100g were found in snack bars compared to those with protein claims (Table 1).

Table 1. Average (range) nutrition content per 100g.

Category (no. of products)	Energy (kcal)	Total fats (g)	Saturated fat (g)	Total sugars (g)	Fibre (g)	Protein (g)	Salt (g)
All snack bars (458)	405 (304-580)	17.0 (2.2-46.0)	5.9 (0.5-19.0)	18.0 (0.7-53.0)	9.4 (0.3-31.0)	17.2 (0.0-50.0)	0.45 (0.01-2.00)
Snack bars with protein claims (225)	395 (304-553)	17.0 (2.8-37.5)	6.6 (0.6-16.0)	10.2 (0.7-39.0)	9.8 (0.3-28.0)	27.1 (4.0-50)	0.55 (0.01-2.00)

In a suggested serving size (Table 2), there were notable variations in nutrient content, with energy ranging from 62-378kcal, saturated fat ranging from 0.2-11.0g and salt ranging from 0.00-0.90g. Fibre content ranged from 0.0g-15.0g, with an average of 3.9g, and the protein content ranged from 0.6-25.0g per serving. The average sugar content per serving was 7g - nearly 2 teaspoons of sugar and equivalent to one-third (29%) of a 7–10-year-old's maximum recommended daily limit for free sugars.

Table 2. Average (range) nutrition content per serve.

Category (no. of products)	Energy (kcal)	Total fats (g)	Saturated fat (g)	Total sugars (g)	Fibre (g)	Protein (g)	Salt (g)
All snack bars (458)	175 (62-378)	7.2 (0.8-20.0)	2.6 (0.2-11.0)	7.0 (0.4-26.5)	3.9 (0.0-15.0)	8.4 (0.6-25.0)	0.21 (0.00-0.90)
Snack bars with protein claims (225)	199 (78-307)	8.3 (1.4-17.0)	3.3 (0.5-9.0)	4.8 (0.4-17.0)	4.8 (0.0-15.0)	14.2 (3.2-25.0)	0.28 (0.00-0.90)

Claims

Across all snack bars surveyed, on-pack claims were widespread. Over half (53%) of products featured a “protein” claim, 18% carried a “high in fibre” claim, and a quarter (25%) were labelled “low/no added sugar”.

When looking specifically at snack bars with protein claims, 13% had a “high in fibre” claim, and almost half (44%) featured a “low-sugar” or “no-added sugar” claim.

Product Examples

Table 3 lists examples of products with higher total sugars content per 100g, split into fruit and nut-based, cereal-based and snack bars carrying a “protein” claim. Almost all products carry claims that could give consumers a misleading impression of their nutritional quality, despite containing high levels of sugars content.

Table 3. Example of snack bars with high total sugars content per 100g*

Product	Energy per 100g	Sugars per 100g	Energy per serve	Sugars per serve	Claims on pack
Fruit and nut-based bars					
M&S Dark Chocolate Date Bar (50g)	396	53.0	198	26.5	Only 4 ingredients
Nakd Raw Fruit & Nut Bars Salted Caramel (35g)	377	49.0	134	17.0	100% Natural ingredients, no added sugar, raw cold-pressed, 1 of your 5 a day, source of fibre, vegan, gluten free, dairy free, no colours or preservatives, raw, pressed together without heat, contains naturally occurring sugars
Nakd. Raw Fruit & Nut Bars Blueberry Muffin (35g)	368	49.0	131	17.0	100% Natural ingredients, No added sugar, 1 of your 5 a day, source of fibre, vegan, gluten free, dairy free, no colours or preservatives, raw, pressed together without heat, contains naturally occurring sugars
Cereal-based bars					
Kellogg's Rice Krispies Squares Curious Caramel & Chocolate Snack Bar (36g)	436	39.0	157	14.0	Suitable for vegetarians
Lexi's Excuses Strawberry Crispy Bar (25g)	396	38.8	99	9.7	99 kcal, gluten free, vegetarian
Kellogg's Rice Krispies Squares Chocolate Orange Snack Bar (36g)	433	38.0	156	14.0	
Snack bars with "Protein" claim					
Deliciously Ella Roasted Peanut Protein Ball (40g)	375	39.0	150	16.0	Natural plant-based, 100% plant-based, blended with peanut butter, a natural source of protein, high in fibre, made with 5 natural ingredients
Myprotein Filled Wafer Hazelnut (24g)	553	29.0	133	7.0	133 kcal, 4.8g protein
Nakd. Protein Bars Peanut Butter (45g)	420	28.0	189	13.0	100% Natural ingredients, no added sugar, plant-based protein, gluten free, dairy free, dairy-free, vegan, cold pressed, 7g protein, raw fruit and nut pressed together without heat, contains naturally occurring sugars

*Product examples are based on per 100g to make direct and fair comparisons across products.

The highest calorie product was *Chia Charge Chia Seed Flapjack With Sea Salt Flakes 80g* at 378kcal per serving, followed by *Chia Charge Chia Seed Flapjack With Banana 80g* with 357kcal and *Holland & Barrett Ginger Flapjack 80g* with 347kcal, while *Skinny Crunch Light Salted Caramel 19g* had the lowest at 62kcal per serve.

Table 4 shows examples of snack bars with lower total sugars.

Table 4. Examples of snack bars with lower total sugars per 100g

Product	Energy per 100g	Sugars per 100g	Energy per serve	Sugars per serve	Claims on pack
Grenade Dark Chocolate Mint Flavour (60g)	337	0.7	202	0.4	20g protein, high protein, low sugar, less than 2g sugar
VOW Nutrition Protein Bar - Salted Caramel (48g)	374	0.8	179	0.4	16g protein, low sugar bar, 100% vegan
Holland & Barrett Precision Plant Protein Bar Dark Chocolate Seasalt (65g)	304	1.0	198	0.7	20g protein, plant-based, high in fibre, low sugar

Comparison to Nutrition Labelling Criteria

UK's voluntary front-of-pack colour-coded nutrition labelling

The UK's voluntary front-of-pack colour-coded nutrition labelling policy is aimed at helping consumers make healthier food and drink choices quickly and easily. The labelling system combines traffic light colour coding with numerical information on fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt content per 100g, with additional portion thresholds, to signify if a product is high, medium or low in a particular nutrient [13] (Table 5).

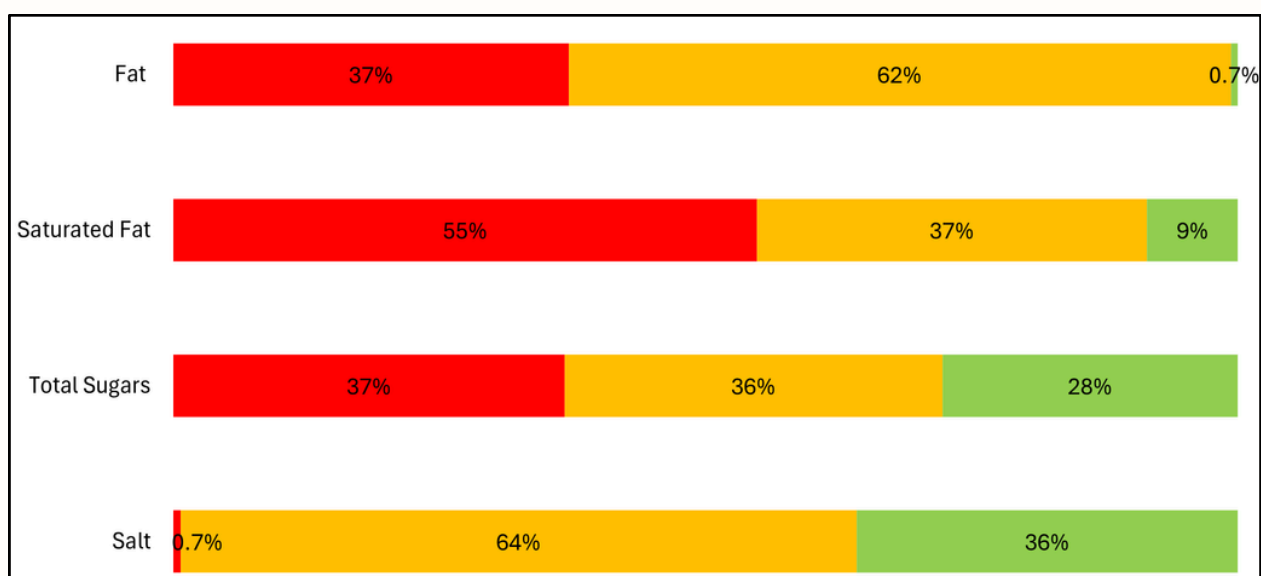
Table 5. UK colour-coded criteria for 100g of food, and portion cut-offs

Text	LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH	
Colour code	Green	Amber	Red	
			>25% of RIs	>30% of RIs
Fat	≤ 3.0g/100g	> 3.0g to ≤ 17.5g/100g	> 17.5g/100g	> 21g/portion
Saturated fat	≤ 1.5g/100g	> 1.5g to ≤ 5.0g/100g	> 5.0g/100g	> 6.0g/portion
Total sugars	≤ 5.0g/100g	> 5.0g to ≤ 22.5g /100g	> 22.5g/100g	> 27g/portion
Salt	≤ 0.3g/100g	> 0.3g to ≤ 1.5g/100g	>1.5g/100g	>1.8g/portion

Among the 458 products, 37% were high in fat, 55% high in saturated fat, 37% high in total sugars and 0.7% high in salt, and only 28% were low in total sugars content (Figure 1). Among snack bars with protein claims (225), 70% were high in saturated fat. Across all snack bars, 7% were high in fat, saturated fat and total sugars combined.

Among those carrying a "high in fibre" claim, nearly one-third (31%) were high in total sugars, highlighting inconsistencies between marketing claims and nutritional quality.

Figure 1: Front-of-pack colour-coded nutrition labelling of all snack bars



While the UK's voluntary front-of-pack traffic light labelling system, introduced in 2013, was a positive step towards improving consumer understanding of nutrition, it has not been updated in over a decade, and is inconsistently applied across products and retailers. As a result, many snack bars on the market still lack front-of-pack information, and the existing thresholds no longer align with current public health guidance on nutrients, such as free sugars.

In contrast, several countries have moved towards mandatory, evidence-based labelling policies, with proven results. A leading example is Chile's warning label system, introduced in 2016, which uses black hexagonal labels on packaging to clearly indicate when a product exceeds recommended limits for nutrients of concern. Chile's Food Labelling and Advertising law had implementation phases (2016, 2018 and 2019) that progressively tightened the nutrient thresholds, triggering warning labels for packaged foods and drinks high in energy, sugars, saturated fats, or sodium [14]. This system has not only improved consumer awareness but also prompted widespread product reformulation — offering valuable lessons for the UK as it considers how best to modernise its own labelling policy.

Phase 1 (June 2016): Set the most lenient thresholds for solid foods (products exceeded limits if they contained ≥ 350 kcal, 22.5g sugars, 6g saturated fat, or 800mg sodium per 100g).

Phase 2 (June 2018): Thresholds tightened (≥ 300 kcal, 15g sugars, 5g saturated fat, 500mg sodium per 100g).

Phase 3 (June 2019): Introduced the strictest limits (solids ≥ 275 kcal, 10g sugars, 4g saturated fat, 400mg sodium per 100g).

If we were to apply Phase 3 of the Chilean threshold to UK snack bars, then around two in three (68%) would receive a warning label for total sugars content. Recent modelling comparing the mandatory use of traffic-light labels with stricter nutrient-warning labels shows the latter could have almost double the impact: cutting obesity rates by four percentage points and preventing around 110,000 obesity-related deaths in the UK [15].



Compliance with Government Guidelines

Nutrient Profiling Model

The NPM, developed by the Food Standards Agency in 2004, is used to assess the nutritional quality of food and drink, primarily to regulate advertising of products high in fat, salt and or sugar (HFSS) to children [16]. The model assigns a score based on the balance of positive nutrients (fruit, vegetables, nuts, fibre, and protein) and negative nutrients (energy, saturated fat, total sugars and salt). Foods scoring 4 or more are classified as less healthy (HFSS).

For this analysis, individual NPM scores were calculated for each snack bar. Assumptions were made regarding fruit, vegetable, and nut content based on ingredient declarations: dates and date paste were treated as dried fruit and puree, and desiccated coconut was treated as a dried nut. Where the ingredient percentages were not provided, the proportion of dates (listed as the first ingredient) was estimated at 30-40%, allowing the total composition to sum to 100%. When fibre was not listed, the category average from McCance and Widdowson's Food Composition Tables was applied [17].

Overall, 64% of snack bars were classified as HFSS, meaning they would be restricted from in-store promotions or advertising under current and forthcoming regulations. Despite this, many of these products still displayed two or more claims on pack (Table 6).

Table 6. Average NPM score (range) and proportion of products HFSS.

	Number of products	Average NPM score (range)	Proportion of products that are HFSS
All snack bars	458	7.9 (-6-24)	64%

Calorie and Sugar Reduction Guidelines

The UK sugar reduction programme, introduced by Public Health England in 2016, set voluntary targets to reduce sugar by 20% across key food categories contributing most to children's sugar intake [11]. The guidelines encouraged reformulation, portion size reduction and promotion of lower-calorie options. Due to limited progress, the deadline for achieving these voluntary targets was extended from 2020 to the end of 2025.

For this analysis, we applied the 20% sugar reduction guideline for biscuits (26.2g/100g, with maximum portion size of 325kcal) to all snack bars – including those carrying protein claims. The UK Sugar Reduction programme grouped energy bars with cereal bars under the biscuit category within the New Product Development guidance. This categorisation provides the closest applicable benchmark for snack bars more broadly, even when their base ingredients of marketing (e.g. protein-focused) may differ. Findings show the majority of snack bars (99%) met the maximum calorie cap per serving, while 28% exceeded the 20% sugar reduction guideline.

“ Industry Comments

We offered the opportunity for the industry to verify the data we collected and to share their reformulation plans. All retailers with five or more products, as well as manufacturers with five or more products and featured in the top 10 higher-calorie and/or higher-sugar per 100g, were invited to discuss their sugar reduction priorities.

Only one manufacturer responded with details of their reformulation activities. Kellanova shared the following recent reformulation efforts and progress on sugar reduction and product innovation:

- Since 2011, over 57,000 tonnes of sugar have been removed from their cereal and K snacks across Europe, achieved through 26 sugar reduction projects, including multiple recipes and food formats.
- Over 2,500 tonnes of sugar have been removed from K snacks specifically.
- Their product innovation continues to focus on meeting the needs of their consumers, with 2025 seeing the launch of Kellogg's High Protein bars (with 8g of protein per bar) and Kellogg's Oatie bars (high in fibre, made with wholegrain oats).
- In 2026, a new non-HFSS children's snack bar will be launched, expanding their portfolio of non-HFSS children's cereals.



Conclusion

This analysis shows that most snack bars in the UK remain high in sugars and saturated fat despite being marketed as healthy. Voluntary measures, from front-of-pack labelling to sugar reduction targets, have achieved limited success.

The UK Government must seize this opportunity and act decisively:

- 1. Introduce fiscal levers to drive reformulation.**
- 2. Mandate modern, consistent nutrition labelling aligned with public health evidence.**
- 3. Strengthen the NPM to reflect free sugars and portion size.**
- 4. Restrict misleading health and nutrition claims on unhealthy products.**

Only by closing these regulatory gaps can we create healthier food environments and protect the next generation from diet-related disease.



Annex.

Methology

Data Collection

We surveyed snack bars available for purchase across ten major UK retailers (Aldi, Asda, Iceland, Lidl, Marks & Spencer (via Ocado), Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco, The Co-operative and Waitrose), collectively representing the largest market share in the UK [18]. Data was collected between July and September 2025, using a combination of online and in-store methods, following strict criteria (Table 1a). For each product, we collected product and company name, pack weight, serving size, full nutrition information per 100g and per serve, ingredients, price and product description. Only products available for purchase in large supermarket chains in England were included in this report and may not reflect a business's total portfolio.

All retailers were contacted and offered the opportunity to provide us with the nutritional information for their own-label snack bars. Aldi and Lidl provided us with their product portfolio, while the remaining nutrition and on-pack claims data were collected during in-store visits. In November 2025, all retailers with five or more products were given the opportunity to verify the data collected, as well as manufacturers with five or more products and featured in the top 10 higher calorie and sugars examples per 100g and top 5 high calorie per serve examples, to validate their data and were invited to meet and discuss their sugar reduction priorities.

Table 1a: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
• Cereal-based bars • Nut-based bars • Date-based bars • Go ahead fruit slices – yoghurt bars • Fruit-based bars • Soft-bake bars • Oat-based bars • Protein-based bars • All bar products (e.g. chocolate confectionery and brownies) with explicit "protein" claims on the packaging • Duplicates of the same product in different packaging sizes	• Chocolate bars without a "protein" claim • Brownies without "protein" claim • Cake bars, e.g. Soreen • Breakfast biscuits • Products with no nutrition information available on the retailer's websites

Data analysis

The nutritional content per 100g and per serve of each product was analysed against several national and international initiatives to encourage industry reformulation. Snack bars included products primarily made from cereals, oats, nuts, fruits, or combinations (Table 1a) and bars carrying explicit "high protein" or "protein" claims on pack, regardless of base ingredients. This included bars formulated with added protein (e.g. whey, soy, or pea protein) as well as protein-labelled chocolate or brownie-style bars.

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About Action on Salt and Sugar

Action on Salt and Sugar is a registered UK charity (1098818) based at Queen Mary University of London, working to improve population health and food environments through impactful research on the nutritional content of food and drink. We inform policy, influence the food industry, raise awareness, and build advocacy for salt and sugar reformulation.

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