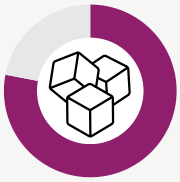
ADDRESSING THE UNJUSTIFIED SPREADS EXEMPTION

Why sweet spreads should be included in high fat, salt and sugar advertising and promotion restrictions

Action on Salt & Sugar

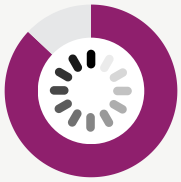
KEY INSIGHTS



Many spreads are high in sugars
Of 834 spreads surveyed, 78% were high in sugars, based on the front-of-pack labelling criteria



Small servings still carry a lot of sugars
One 15g serving of chocolate spread can contain up to 9.2g of sugars, almost 40% of a 7-to-10-year old's daily limit of free sugars.



Current sugar reduction efforts have failed
87% of products with an applicable sugar reduction guideline, still exceeded them.



Current regulations contain a major loophole. Over four in five spreads were classified as high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) under the Nutrient Profiling Model (NPM), however they are currently exempt from HFSS advertising and promotion restrictions.

Current regulations treat spreads as an exception, despite the majority being classified as less healthy. To close this loophole, government must:

1. **Extend advertising and promotion restrictions to include a broader range of less healthy food categories, including sweet spreads.**
2. **Apply the updated NPM to existing and future policies**
3. **Strengthen transparency through Healthier Food Targets and Reporting**

WHY ACTION IS NEEDED

Free sugars intake in the UK is consistently above the recommended limit, providing 10.5% of energy in children and 10.0% in adults, against a 5% maximum (1). Among adults, sugar, preserves and confectionery are the second largest source of free sugars, contributing around 25%, and the third largest among children aged 4 to 18, contributing around 20% (2). There is overwhelming evidence to show that excess free sugars intake is associated with an increased risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, dental decay and cardiovascular disease (3). Among UK children aged 2 to 15, 26% are living with overweight and obesity (4). Reducing sugars intake should continue to be a priority for the UK government.

Although sweet and nut spreads are typically consumed in small quantities, their regular, habitual consumption can contribute a considerable amount of sugars at the population level. In the UK, nine in ten consumers report using these products, with three in ten consuming them most days (5). Their market value is predicted to continue rising (5).

VOLUNTARY ACTION HAS NOT DELIVERED

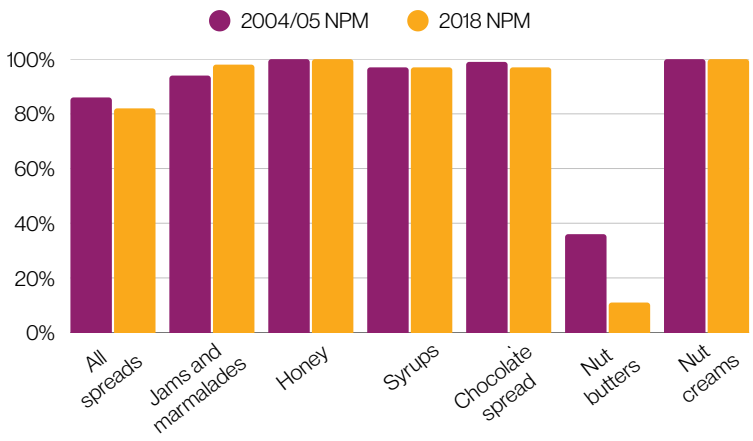
Sweet spreads were included in the government's voluntary sugar reduction programme, which aimed to reduce sugars by 20% by 2020 (6). However, sugar in sweet spreads and sauces fell by only 10.1%, with much of this reduction due to a shift in sales towards nut butter rather than reformulation. Over the same period, total sugar sold in the category rose by 24.5% (7). As a result of this limited progress, the deadline for the programme was extended to 2025.

Our analysis of 834 spreads found that 78% were high in sugars (based on UK front of pack colour-coded labelling criteria) (8), and 87% of products with an applicable sugar reduction guideline still exceeded it. Even one serving contains a large share of a child's daily limit. One 15g serving of chocolate spread contains on average 6.1g of sugars, about 25% of a 7-to-10-year old's daily free sugar limit (24g). Some products contain up to 9.2g sugars per serving (20g), almost 40% of a child's sugars limit. A serving of jam and fruit spreads provides around 35%, and nut cream about 32%.

THE SPREADS LOOPHOLE

Current HFSS regulations use the UK NPM to identify less healthy foods for promotion and advertising regulations (9). However, the restrictions only apply to selected food categories, meaning that many products classified as less healthy, including spreads, remain outside the scope of advertising and promotion restrictions. **Our survey found that 86% of spreads were classified as less healthy under the current 2004/05 NPM, including all honey (Figure 1). Under the updated 2018 NPM, a large proportion of spreads remained less healthy (83%).**

Figure 1. Proportion of spreads classified as HFSS under the 2004/05 and 2018 NPM



Sugar content varies widely within spread sub-categories as well as between them, showing that lower-sugars products are technically possible. For example, jams range from 2.4 -70.7g sugars, and chocolate spreads from 0.6 - 61.0g per 100g.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Extend advertising and promotion restrictions to include a broader range, including sweet spreads

Spreads are not covered by current advertising and promotions restrictions, despite the majority being classified as less healthy. Including them and other HFSS products would ensure that products with similar nutritional profiles are treated consistently.

1

Apply the updated Nutrient Profiling Model to existing and future policies

UK food policy still uses the 2004/05 model, rather than the 2018 model that reflects updated dietary recommendations. Most spreads remained 'less healthy' under both models, so updating it would not weaken action on spreads.

2

Strengthen transparency through Healthier Food Targets and Reporting

Mandatory reporting on the healthiness of food sales, committed by Government in the 10-Year Health Plan, would create accountability and allow government to track progress. It would also encourage companies to reformulate products and increase sales of healthier alternatives.

3

[1] Office for Health Improvement & Disparities. National Diet and Nutrition Survey 2019 to 2023: report. 2025
[2] Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. National Diet and Nutrition Survey 2019 to 2023: chapter 5 data. 2025
[3] NHS. Sugar: The Facts. 2023
[4] NHS England Digital. Children's overweight and obesity Summary. Health Survey for England, 2024. 2026.
[5] Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. Customized report service: Sweet spreads – European Union and United Kingdom. 2024
[6] Public Health England. Sugar Reduction: Achieving the 20% A technical report outlining progress to date, guidelines for industry, 2015 baseline levels in key foods and next steps. 2017
[7] Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. Sugar reduction programme: Industry progress 2015 to 2020. 2022
[8] Department of Health FSA. Guide to creating a front of pack (FoP) nutrition label for pre-packed products sold through retail outlets. 2016
[9] Department of Health and Social Care. Nutrient profiling model 2004 to 2005. 2011