

THE GREAT
DEBATE

Are supermarkets making us fat?

Supermarkets play a key role in what and how much we consume, and use clever tricks to influence our choices. So are they blame for Britain's obesity epidemic?

Two-for-one offers on junk food, multipacks of crisps and ready meals full of sugar... supermarkets may talk a good game when it comes to 'healthy choices', but they've been accused of putting profits before customers' needs, and relying on basic psychology tricks to dupe us into stocking up on unhealthy food.

"They use a whole host of methods," explains Dr Jeffery Bray, senior lecturer in retail consumer behaviour at Bournemouth University. "Positioning is paramount – most supermarkets have a large carpeted area at the entrance to allow us to slacken our pace, as the slower you are walking the more likely you are to buy. Staples like milk and bread are also often hidden at the back of the store so the shopper will have to walk past lots of other products to get to them, while the smell of 'freshly baked' bread – which is often not made in store – is used to entice people to buy.

"There are offers on healthy products, but as these tend to be more perishable shoppers are less likely to be swayed by offers and stock up in bulk," he adds.

So are supermarkets doing enough to promote healthy eating or are they tempting us to fill up on junk food?



“YES”

Pamela Walker, 60, lives in Northumberland

Six years ago, I developed a rheumatic disease that left me almost housebound for a while. As I wasn't getting much exercise, I started reading up on nutrition – I was shocked to learn that many of the foods I had been eating, and which the

supermarkets were promoting as healthy, were actually bad for me.

Many have their own 'healthy eating' ranges of ready meals and snacks, but while these may be low in fat, they are often really high in sugar, which can cause us to gain weight. Not everyone has the time or ability to understand nutritional labelling – particularly if you're a parent with a job and a busy lifestyle – so people will sometimes make decisions based only on the packaging, and this is often very misleading.

I also feel the promotional offers and multipacks of junk food don't help us eat healthily, as it's often cheaper to buy an extra large bar

of chocolate, say, and the vast majority of deals tend to be on convenience food.

Of course, no one is forcing people to buy these products, but for those on a limited budget, getting a free item or something extremely cheap is hard to resist. Although planning carefully and cooking everything yourself could potentially bring down the cost, that's not always possible. My daughter has just had twins, and has a toddler, so she doesn't have the time to cook from scratch. I'm sure there are many people in her position who would benefit from more affordable and convenient healthy options.

Supermarkets massively over-promote unhealthy foods because junk food is where the big profit is. It's low quality and cheap to produce. I'd wager the same company that makes the chocolate bars also has their hand in some diet product a few aisles away – they charge you to make you fat, then to try and get slim again!

Not only is junk food more visible – with unhealthy foods often at eye level, on the end of aisles and scattered throughout the store – but it's often a lot cheaper, with supermarkets putting better and more frequent offers on unhealthy foods than on healthier choices. I once had



“MAYBE”

Alan Burton, 41, lives in Cheshire

a French lodger who remarked how in France it's a lot more expensive to be an unhealthy eater, with the fresh food being much cheaper, but here it's the exact opposite!

That said, while shopping healthily can be a bit of a struggle, I don't think they can take the full blame for making us fat either, as we

are ultimately responsible for our own choices. There are healthy options available on a budget that won't make you fat, and it's down to the individual to choose them.

You've got to research how to eat healthily and make a conscious decision to shop this way, otherwise you will just fall for the cheapest offer every time. ➤



Pollyanna Hale, 35, lives in West Sussex with her husband and two daughters, age 3 and 6

Healthy eating is very important to me as I'm a mother and a nutritionist (thefitnumformula.com), and I think supermarkets are definitely doing enough. Although there are lots of junk-food promotions, I see plenty of offers on healthy food too – such as on meat, fish and organic produce. You just have to look out for them. When I walk down the fruit and veg aisle in my local supermarket there are lots of three-for-two deals, and I've also seen apples with Barbie and Mickey Mouse stickers on to make them appeal to kids, which is a really great idea.

There are thousands of different products suiting every budget, taste and dietary preference, so I don't see how anyone could walk into a shop and say there are no healthy foods. I also don't think buying healthy produce from supermarkets is really that

expensive. People have a perception that junk food is cheaper, but the convenience of having something made for you, like a ready meal, definitely makes it more expensive, and you're getting next to no nutrition for your money so will need to buy more to fill you up. For most people shopping is so expensive because half of what they buy goes in the bin as they're not taking account of use-by dates, but if you plan your meals properly it's just as cheap to eat healthily.

We buy really nutritious, organic produce from the supermarket, but I don't think we spend any more than a family buying junk food because we never throw anything away. I normally buy roasting joints of meat, like a whole chicken, and the leftovers last for days. We also freeze things when they're near their use-by date and use up leftovers in omelettes or risottos, so nothing ever gets turned into waste.

At the end of the day, supermarkets can tempt us all they like but the power is in the hands of the purchaser. After all, slim people shop in the same supermarkets as overweight people so the supermarkets can't be to blame. While there might be a lot of junk food on sale, I think supermarkets just respond to our choices and what the customer wants, not the other way around.

The facts

67 per cent of men and 57 per cent of women in the UK are believed to be overweight or obese.

A recent study of eight developed countries found a direct correlation between how big the supermarkets are with the level of obesity. Reasons include a tendency to buy more than is needed and to shop less often, thus buying less fresh food.

According to Cambridge University, a healthy diet costs three times that of one high in junk food. Other research suggests healthy eating adds £1,460 to the annual food bill of a family of four.

An investigation on Channel 4's *Dispatches* found that fresh fruit and vegetables from markets and local shops were up to 35 per cent cheaper than those bought in supermarkets.



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