

Food Standards Agency Report Shows Children's Menus Need Improvement

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has revealed the results of research undertaken in partnership with local councils, into children's meals served in restaurants in Northern Ireland.

Key findings of the report, which is titled [What's on the Children's Menu](#) include:

Choice was limited on children's menus and few healthy options were available.

The most popular children's meals were fried chicken and chips, sausages and chips and a burger and chips.

The most popular children's meals were high in energy, saturated fat and salt -

- **43% of meals contained more than half the average amount of energy recommended for 5-year-olds.**
- **47% of meals contained more than half the average amount of saturated fat recommended for 5-year-olds.**
- **70% of meals contained more than half the maximum amount of salt recommended for 5-year-olds.**

Chips were available as a side with 72% of meals on children's menus while vegetables were available with 24% of meals.

Families in Northern Ireland eat out regularly and so food businesses such as restaurants, fast food outlets and cafés have significant influence over consumer diets. As evidence suggests food prepared out of the home tends to be higher in energy, saturated fat, sugar and salt and lower in fruit and vegetables than meals prepared at home, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and local councils in Northern Ireland conducted research into the foods available to children when eating out and the nutritional content of this food.

Discussing the breadth of the research **Alexis Gamble, Environmental Health Manager**, who represents the local councils in NI that carried out the survey said:

“The research incorporated a survey with restaurant owners and managers, analysis of children's menus from restaurants and nutritional analysis of popular children's meals served in restaurants in Northern Ireland. Environmental Health Officers from the eleven local councils in Northern Ireland were actively involved in each aspect, conducting surveys and overseeing the collection of children's meals for nutritional analysis. It was an extensive process, which has generated insight that could be used to inform work to support food businesses to make the food they serve to children healthier.”

Outlining steps that are being taken to support businesses **Professor Susan Jebb OBE, Chair of the Food Standards Agency** said:

“I am delighted that the FSA has been able to conduct this important research as part of our contribution to the NI Obesity prevention strategy. The findings show that work is needed to improve the nutritional quality of food available to children when eating out. Encouragingly however most restaurant owners and managers surveyed saw their sector as having a role in

improving children's diets. To support restaurants to do this, the FSA has published '[Healthier catering tips for children's menus](#)'. The guidance which is freely available to download provides tips for businesses on inexpensive steps they can take to improve the nutritional value of their children's meals."

Commenting on the research findings **Noyona Chundur, Chief Executive of the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland** said:

"The Consumer Council's food research over the past two years highlights parents' keenness to provide a healthy and varied diet for their children. However, our research also heard about difficulties faced by parents with children who are picky eaters.

This is where the FSA's Catering tips for children's menus, which accompanies this report, is such a useful tool. It strikes a good balance between providing food that younger diners may expect to see on the menu but gives guidance on preparing it in a healthier way."

The Healthier Children's Menu Guidance is just one channel of support available to restaurants. The FSA also provides a free online tool, [MenuCal](#) that enables businesses to calculate energy information of the meals they provide.