

What's behind our choices? Understanding food purchases and behaviours in the out of home environment in Scotland.

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At Food Standards Scotland We have a unique role, working independently of Ministers and industry to provide advice which is impartial, and based on robust science and data.

Our remit covers all aspects of the food chain which can impact on public health – aiming to protect consumers from food safety risks and promote healthy eating.

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Context

'Out of home' refers to:

- Any food or drink bought and eaten away from home, including 'on the go'
- Any takeaway or home delivered food

Eating out of home in Scotland – what does it mean for our health?

Eating out of home has become part of everyday life in Scotland. It's no longer just for sit-down meals in restaurants on a special occasion. Many of us grab food 'on the go' because it's quick, easy, and fits into our busy work schedules. Whether it's grabbing a coffee and a pastry, picking up a sandwich for lunch, choosing dinner from the workplace canteen, or ordering in a takeaway, eating out is now part of how we live.

It can be enjoyable and convenient, but there is a catch. The options around us are often not very healthy. A recent survey found that 21% of calories consumed in Scotland came from out of home food (1). With nearly 1 in 3 adults living with obesity and almost 1 in 5 children at risk of obesity in Scotland (2), the food offered and promoted when we eat out of home matters not only for our health now but also for the health of future generations.

This report brings together the latest research to show how the out of home environment affects what we buy and eat in Scotland. It uses data from across the UK. This report is for policy makers, educators, stakeholders including the food industry, health professionals and the public.

Note: This report does not contain any information on alcoholic drinks.

How we interact with the out of home environment



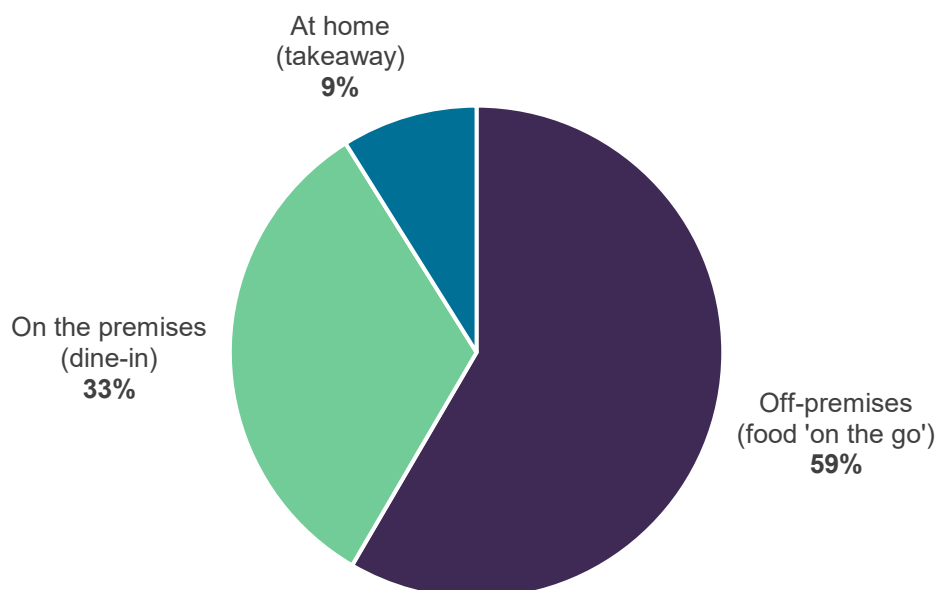
A common occurrence where convenience is key

In 2025, nearly everyone in Scotland ate out of home, showing just how common it has become. On average, we did so three to four times per week, typically buying around two items per visit, at a cost of around £6.30 (3). For many of us, eating out of home is simply part of daily life - whether before or after work or school, while travelling, or in between regular activities.

The rise of food 'on the go'

Speed and convenience have become the driving force that shapes our out of home eating behaviours. Food 'on the go' was by far the most common way people in Scotland ate out of home, making up 59% of eating occasions in 2023. Only a third of out of home eating occasions were 'dine in', and 10% were takeaway (4).

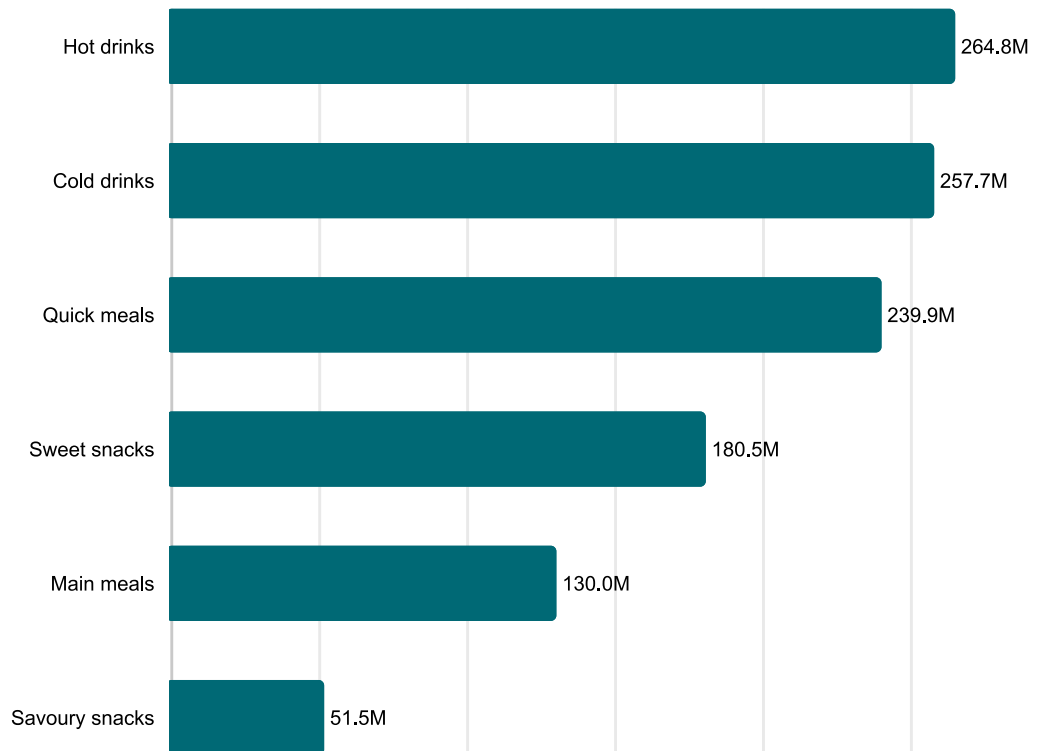
Where and how out of home food was eaten in Scotland in 2023



Convenience shapes what we buy

During 2025, we tended to buy quick, convenient and lower cost options such as drinks and quick meals the most, with main meals being purchased much less often (3). This pattern underlines a key trend: many of our out of home eating behaviours are driven not just by taste, but by convenience, time and budget.

Number of transactions in millions by food and drink category in Scotland in 2025



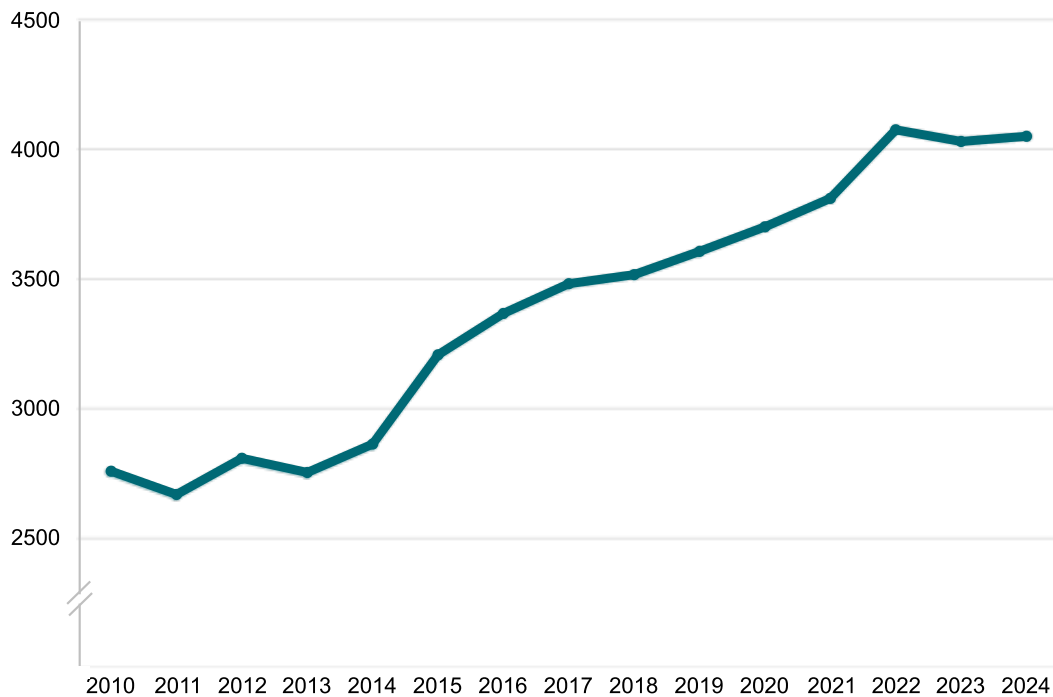
Scotland's changing out of home landscape

The number of places to eat out of home in Scotland has increased between 2010 and 2024 by over 20%, from 12,320 to 14,840 outlets (5). These figures don't include convenience stores selling ready to eat food, of which there were 5,228 in Scotland in 2025, meaning that the actual number of outlets providing out of home food is much higher (6).

The rapid rise of takeaways

Takeaways in particular have grown quickly, with an increase of almost 50% between 2010 to 2024 (5). This increase means many areas now have more immediate access to fast, high calorie foods than ever before.

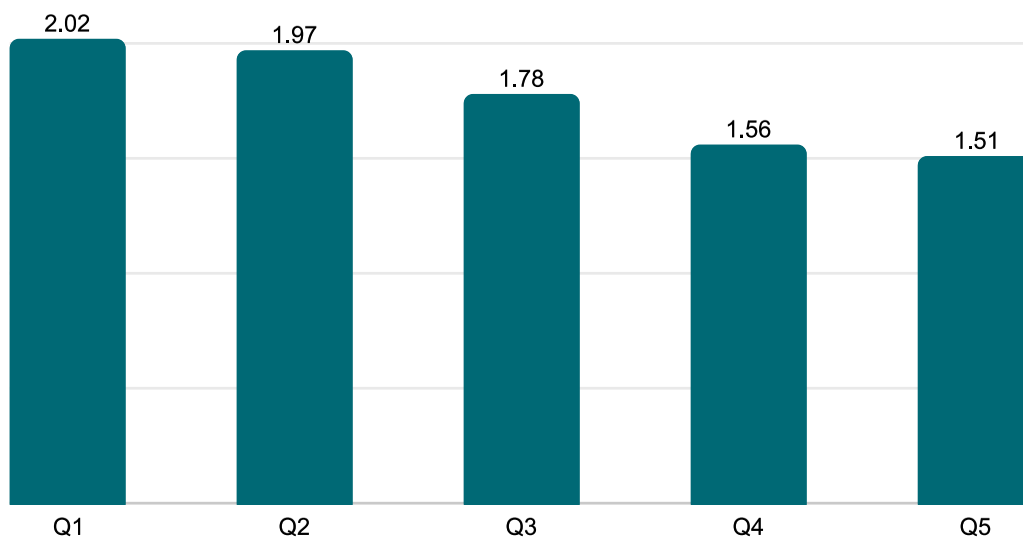
Number of takeaway outlets in Scotland from 2010 to 2024



Inequalities in the out of home food environment

The prevalence of takeaway food outlets in different areas are not equal across Scotland. The most deprived areas (SIMD Q1) have the highest median number of takeaways per person, while the least deprived (SIMD Q5) have the lowest (7). Variation in takeaway availability in different areas of deprivation may interact with other social and environmental factors linked to health inequalities.

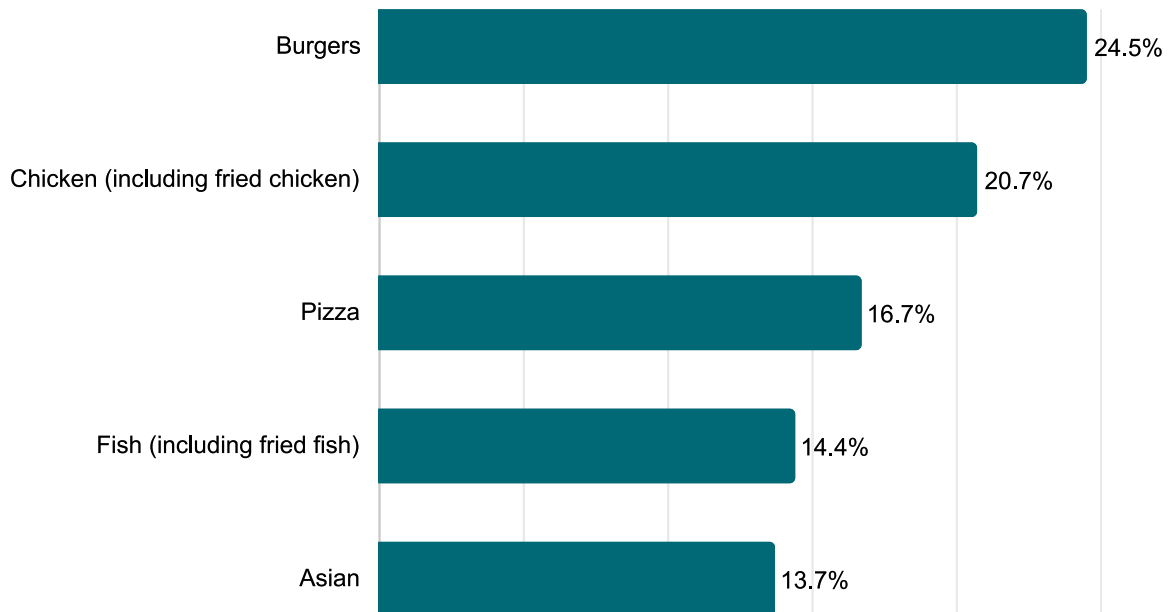
Median takeaways per 1000 people (among data zones with takeaways) by SIMD quintile in Scotland in 2024



What are we buying to take away?

We bought burgers more often than any other takeaway food in Scotland in 2023, making up almost a quarter of trips. Other popular foods were pizza, chicken and fish (including fried varieties) (4). These tend to be high in calories, affordable, and widely available, making them appealing options, particularly when time and money are limited.

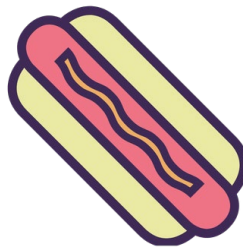
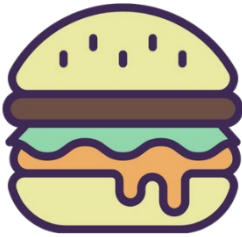
Top five takeaway foods purchased in Scotland in 2023 by percentage share



Speed and convenience shape our behaviours

Eating out of home has become part of everyday life in Scotland, shaped by convenience, cost and the environment around us. Quick meals and drinks are popular choices, and the number of takeaway outlets has increased over recent years, with the more deprived areas of Scotland having the highest median number of takeaways per person.

How healthy is eating out?



Food and drink available out of home are often high in calories, saturated fat, sugar, and salt, making it very challenging for consumers to eat and drink healthy options.

What is in the food we eat when out and about?

In 2021, nearly two thirds of meals bought out of home in Great Britain were higher than Public Health England's recommendation of around 600 calories per meal (8,9). Almost one in five meals had more than double this amount!

Meals that contributed most to calories purchased were often from fast food outlets, and included (8):

- Burger with a side and a soft drink: 1,022 calories
- Fish and chips: 1,425 calories



1,022 calories



1,425 calories

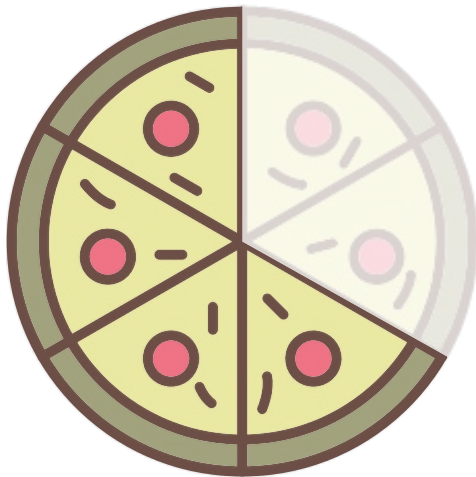
Forty percent of us who order takeaway or delivery food say it's difficult to find healthy options (10).

When actual food samples were analysed, the results were even more striking. Nearly all UK wide takeaway meals sampled exceeded 600 calories, and over half contained more than 1,200 calories (11). With the Eatwell Guide recommendations of around 2,000 calories a day, a single takeaway could easily provide more than half a day's intake (12).

Exploration of small and independent takeaway outlets in Scotland had similar findings, with high levels of calories, saturated fat and salt found in the food samples analysed. They also showed low levels of fibre, which is a concern as fibre makes a positive contribution to the diet and is something most people eat too little of (13).

Key results from Scotland:

- Battered pizza had an average of 1,327 calories per portion, which is about two-thirds of the recommended daily limit of 2,000 calories
- Doner kebabs had an average of 7.7 grams of salt per portion, which is 28% more than the recommended daily maximum of 6 grams



Battered pizza had an average of **1,327 calories** per portion which is roughly **two-thirds** of the recommended daily limit

Eighteen percent of all the food samples tested had less than two grams of fibre per portion, which is a very small amount compared to the recommended 30 grams per day (14).

Wide ranges in portion size, and therefore calorie content, were found in some of the options explored. For example the largest macaroni cheese sample was more than four times that of the smallest, despite all portions purchased for analysis being 'regular' or 'standard' (13).

Smaller portions are possible! This could both benefit our health, and might even help businesses make more profit and reduce waste.

54% of us said that cheaper prices would encourage us to choose a healthier option (10).

Overall, the above demonstrates that these commonly consumed out of home foods contained high levels of calories, saturated fat and salt. Eating these foods too often could lead to poorer health.

What's on the children's menu?

Children are shaped by the food around them, and unfortunately many of their out of home options also fall short. Nearly half of independent food outlets in Scotland surveyed had a children's menu, and popular items include burgers, chicken nuggets, sandwiches and pizza (15).

An exploration of children's meals found that a cheeseburger meal can provide more than half the daily maximum recommended calorie and salt intakes, and nearly the maximum saturated fat limit for children aged 7 to 10 years (13). Chips were found to be served with 72% of children's meals in Northern Ireland, while vegetables were offered with fewer than a quarter (16).

Nutritional content of average cheeseburger & chips children's meal



	Average content of cheeseburger and chips children's meal	Share of recommended daily maximum
Calories	982 calories	58%
Saturated fat	20.9 grams	98%
Salt	3.4 grams	68%

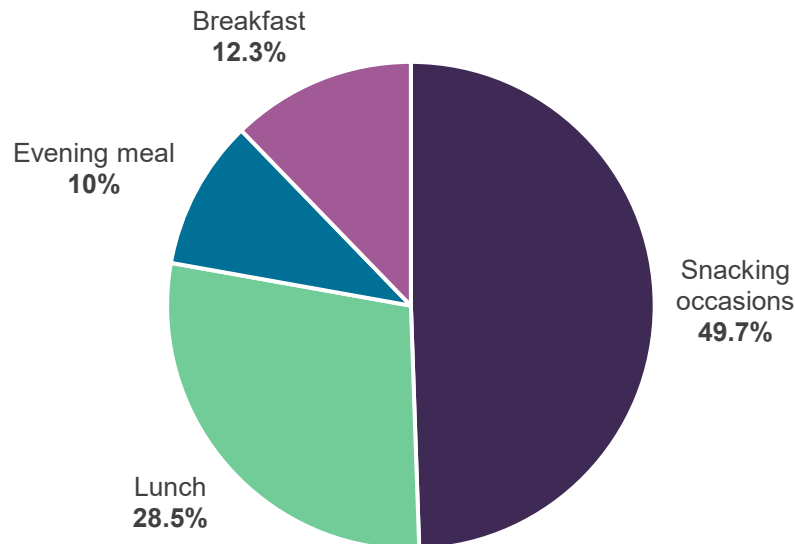
With the rise in children at risk of overweight and obesity, improving these options is needed urgently.

72% of us think that children's menus should be healthier (10).

Snacking comes top when out and about

When eating out of home in Scotland during 2025, we snacked more often than we went out for meals, such as breakfast, lunch or dinner (3). Although, many of these snack options pack as many calories as a full meal (17).

Out of home food purchases by occasion in Great Britain in 2025



When sweet snack options, such as cakes, doughnuts, muffins and traybakes sold out of home were analysed, it was found that:

- the average snack had 449 calories
- almost 1 in 20 snacks exceeded 1,000 calories

Popular dessert drinks like milkshakes, and ice cream floats averaged 451 calories, almost a quarter of the recommended daily intake (17).

When combined with a meal, these dessert drinks can push calorie intake far above healthy levels, often without people realising.

Three quarters of these sweet snack products were more than the UK Government's guideline of a maximum of 325 calories per portion (18). This demonstrates the need for further reformulation and portion size reduction.

A food environment that makes healthy eating hard

Across Scotland, eating out is easy, but eating well while eating out is not. Whether it's a takeaway dinner, a quick snack, or a child's meal, we are flooded with options high in calories, saturated fat, salt and sugar, while healthier alternatives are hard to find. Snacking is the most popular way to eat out, yet many snacks contain enough calories to derail a balanced diet.

How digital technology and promotions shape what we eat



The way we order food has changed dramatically. In 2025, most of our takeaway delivery orders were placed using digital technology, which has made the process almost effortless (3).

However, behind the convenience are promotions and marketing tactics designed to influence what we buy, often without us even realising. Because it is now so easy to order food online, more than half of us are getting takeaways more often. The effect is even stronger in younger people (aged 16 to 24) who were the most frequent users (10). Given that takeaway foods are often less healthy, this growing trend of online ordering may have a negative impact on our health.

Promotions are hard to miss and appear to offer value for money, but looks can be deceiving.

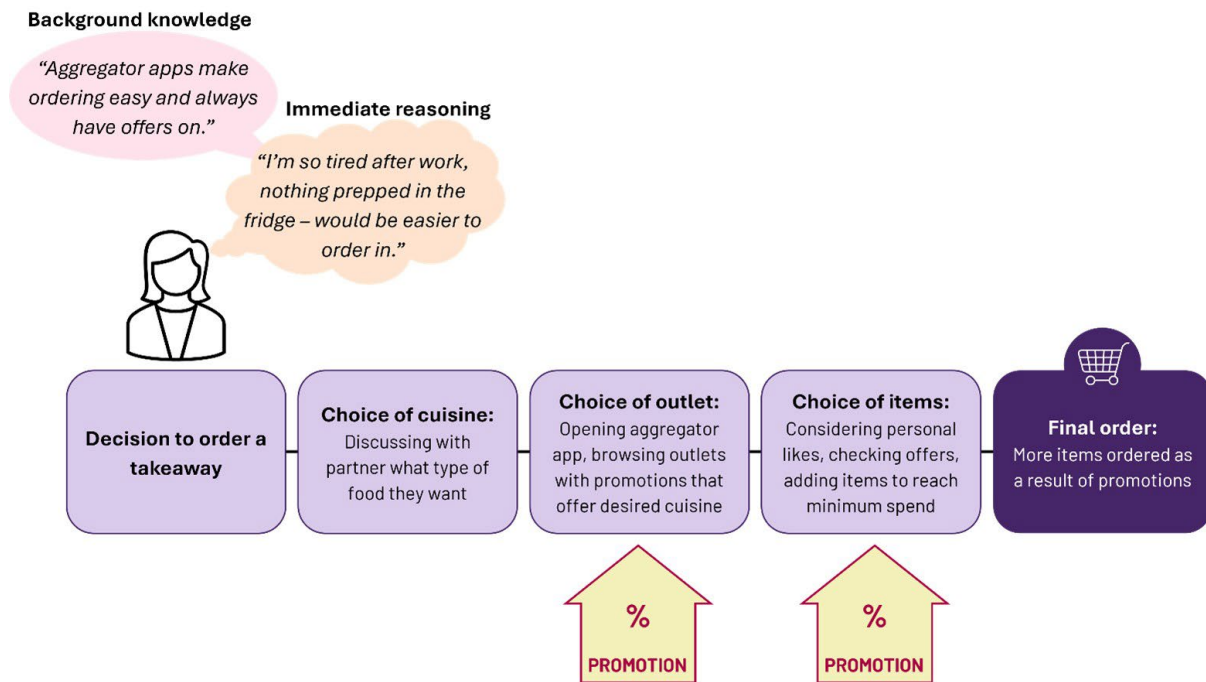
The influence of online promotions

Even before you open a delivery app, promotions are everywhere. Notifications offer discounts, free delivery, meal upgrades, and time-limited offers. They appear to be giving us great value for money, but those eye-catching deals are more than just marketing; they influence what and how much we buy.



A recent study found that we are frequently exposed to promotions when placing orders online, especially when using third party apps, such as Just Eat or Deliveroo. These promotions work, as nearly three quarters of orders reported using a promotion. Price promotions, particularly meal deals and discount with a minimum spend, led to more food being ordered than intended, based on perceived value for money (19).

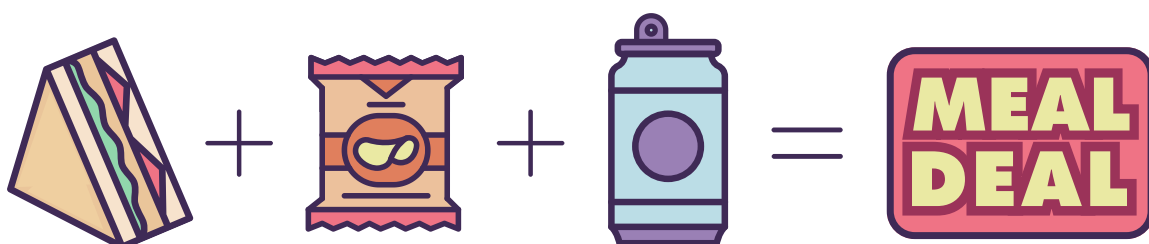
The diagram illustrates a real life example of a decision making process leading to an order placed, and the use of promotions as part of it (19).



When a promotion makes indulgent takeaway food seem like the better deal, healthier choices can easily be pushed aside and we end up buying more than planned.

The deal with meal deals

Meal deals are a common type of price promotion out of home and are often promoted, especially in places such as the front of supermarkets, quick service restaurants and bakeries, where many products are already high in calories, saturated fat, sugar or salt (20). These offer several items together, such as a sandwich, drink and snack, for a set price.



When foods are combined into a meal deal, the total calorie content can increase quickly (21). In some cases, a single meal deal can contain a large amount of the calories we need for an entire day!

Items and estimated calories for sandwich and burger meal deals



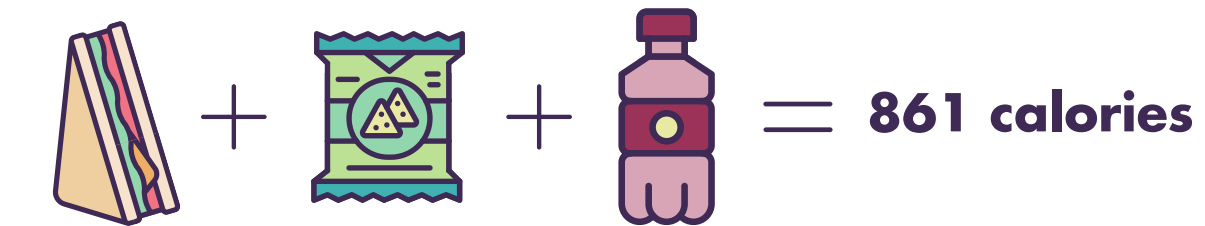
Burger
556 calories

Regular fries
275 calories

Regular cola drink
190 calories

= 1,021 calories

Food type	Calories
Burger	556
Regular fries	275
Regular cola drink	190
Entire meal deal	1,021



Sandwich
417 calories

Salted crisps
234 calories

Cola drink
210 calories

= 861 calories

Food type	Calories
Sandwich	417
Salted crisps	234
Cola drink (500ml)	210
Entire meal deal	861

Digital technology and promotions make it harder to eat healthier

Digital technology has made ordering takeaway food easier and more popular than ever before. However, the combination of convincing online promotions, heavily marketed meal deals and limited healthy options creates an out of home environment that makes healthier eating harder, even for those who want to eat well.

How can we make eating out healthier in Scotland?

This report highlights the urgent need to reshape the out of home environment in Scotland. Action is needed to address these challenges head on and support progress towards the Scottish Dietary Goals (14).

Any effective approach to improving diet and health outcomes should consider the economic and environmental factors that shape our surroundings and influence behaviours. By making healthier options more available, affordable and appealing we can continue to enjoy eating out, without it compromising our health.

More than half of adults across Scotland believe food outlets should help people eat healthier (10).

So what can be done about it?

Food Standards Scotland supports a range of measures that together can improve the out of home environment, and make eating healthier food out of home easier for everyone.

Specifically, we recommend:

- Making nutrition information available on request. This will support out of home outlets to review and improve their menus as well as help consumers make informed choices.
- Reducing portion sizes, particularly for less healthy options.
- Reformulating recipes to reduce calories and high levels of saturated fat, sugar or salt, where possible, and increase amounts of fibre, fruit and vegetables.
- Rebalancing promotions and marketing towards healthier options, ensuring these are available and competitively priced.
- Ensuring that children are offered healthier options which are appealing and promoted.

By implementing these actions, the responsibility for healthier eating won't rest solely with individuals. Instead, Scotland's out of home food environment can support the provision of healthier options, while still allowing people to enjoy eating out of home.

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Glossary

Term	Definition
Convenience store	A small retail shop that typically sells everyday items such as snacks, drinks and basic groceries, often located in residential neighbourhoods
Discretionary foods	Items of food and drink which are high in calories and/or fats, sugar or salt, are low in nutritional value, and are optional in the diet
Fast food	Food that is prepared and served quickly at outlets specialising in speed and convenience, such as quick service restaurants, and often includes items like burgers, chips, pizzas, fried chicken and soft drinks
Food 'on the go'	Items purchased for immediate consumption and intended to be eaten away from the place of purchase, such as a sandwich bought while commuting
Meal deal	A promotion in which consumers are offered additional products for free or at a discount to form a meal, such as a sandwich, drink and snack, or a main and side dish for a set price
Out of home	Refers to food or drink purchased for consumption away from home, including food bought 'on the go', deliveries and takeaways
Out of home digital market	Food and drink ordered for collection or delivery through digital channels, including restaurant-specific apps, third-party platforms such as Deliveroo and Just Eat, and restaurant websites
Quick service restaurant	A food establishment that offers fast food with minimal table service, where customers typically order at a counter or drive-through, pay before eating, and receive their food quickly (for example, McDonald's, Subway and KFC)
Reformulation	Changing the nutritional content of food and drink items to make them healthier, for example by reducing salt, sugar, calories and/or saturated fat
Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)	A relative measure of deprivation across data zones in Scotland, with quintiles dividing ranked areas into five equal groups, from Quintile 1 (most deprived) to Quintile 5 (least deprived)

Supermarket front of store	The area near the entrance of a supermarket that typically sells convenient items such as sandwiches, drinks and snacks
Third-party or aggregator app	A platform that facilitates food ordering, and often delivery, between restaurants and consumers (for example, Just Eat and Deliveroo)