High salt, high sugar and high fat. Not what you expect in your cereal bowl. We give you the low-down on the good and the bad.

In the UK we eat more breakfast cereal than anywhere else in Europe. The shelves are stacked high, and the advent of cereal bars and other ‘eat on-the-go’ products means there’s now little excuse to skip the first meal of the day. But just how healthy a start to the day is your choice of cereal?

We investigate.
Our food is killing us. We eat too much of the wrong types of foods and we are now suffering the health consequences with almost a quarter of people in the UK obese. However, this is nothing compared with what is in store for the future. **16 per cent of 2-15 year olds are obese and 30 per cent are either overweight or obese.** Unless drastic action is taken, we are facing what the Chief Medical Officer has described as a health time-bomb. The impact that diet has on our health can no longer be disputed. Poor food choices are a key risk factor for the major killers. Thirty per cent of deaths from coronary heart disease, as well as around a third of cancers, are believed to be down to diet.

In February 2004, Which?, formerly Consumers' Association, launched its nutrition campaign with a ‘Health Warning to Government' putting forward 12 demands to tackle obesity and diet-related disease.
DO WE NEED BREAKFAST?

It’s the most frequently missed meal – an estimated 23 per cent of the UK population goes without breakfast at home on a regular basis, and over half of all workers never eat breakfast at all. But the evidence suggests that eating breakfast is associated with alertness and better academic performance in children during the morning. Also people who skip breakfast tend to have higher blood cholesterol levels, higher fat intakes and weigh more than those who don’t. And if you skip breakfast and the nutrients it can provide, you often don’t compensate during the day.

Many studies have shown that you increase the amount of micronutrients in your diet if you eat breakfast cereals. Most are fortified with B vitamins and iron, and having milk with cereals also gives you more calcium and vitamin A.

WHAT WE DID

In October our shoppers scoured major supermarkets and bought 100 breakfast cereals produced by the five biggest cereal manufacturers. We compared the fibre, sugar, salt and saturated fat content across and within these brands, using the Food Standards Agency’s guidelines for what’s ‘a little’ and ‘a lot’ in 100g of food (see ‘Key’, page 8). We then asked our expert, a dietitian and public health nutritionist, to identify the worst offenders and the healthier options. We also looked at a variety of on-the-go cereal products, and a range of own-brand cereals to see how they compared. In addition, our nutritionist gave the White family a breakfast MOT, see page 6.

WHAT’S IN A CEREAL?

**Fibre** Many breakfast cereals are a good source of fibre, particularly insoluble fibre, which helps to improve bowel health and prevent constipation. In our branded sample, 58 per cent of cereals were high in fibre, containing 6g or more per 100g of cereal. Adults are advised to eat about 18g of fibre a day, but most of us aren’t getting enough. So cereals higher in fibre are important for adults. Kids don’t need as much fibre, because it can make a small stomach full before it’s had a chance to get enough energy and other nutrients. But cereal with a moderate amount of fibre is still better for them than one with little or none.
Sugar  Over 85 per cent of the cereals in our branded sample contained ‘a lot’ of sugar according to the Food Standards Agency’s (FSA) guidelines (see ‘Key’, page 8). This includes all but one of the 28 branded cereals marketed to children – nine of these contained 40 per cent sugar or more. The only kids’ cereal containing ‘a little’ sugar was Weetabix Ready Brek original.

Quaker Sugar Puffs contained the most sugar, at 49g per 100g. But our expert also pointed out that the manufacturers of cereals such as Nestlé Coco Shreddies and Frosted Shreddies have a larger suggested serving size (45g compared with 30g) – this means a higher dose of sugar per bowl. For instance, a 45g serving of Frosted Shreddies contains almost four heaped teaspoons.

Although many cereals contain a lot of added sugar, it’s thought that they are less likely to cause tooth decay than many other sugary foods. The milk usually eaten with cereal may protect teeth against the action of sugar. But given the current obesity levels, eating highly sugared foods is nonetheless a cause for concern.

Salt  A shocking 40 per cent of our branded cereals contained ‘a lot’ of salt. There’s considerable evidence that salt intake in children is related to increased blood pressure in later life – which is a risk factor for coronary heart disease and stroke. Last year, for the first time, the Government set recommendations for maximum salt intake in children. And pressure groups and the FSA have called for the food industry to reduce salt levels. The industry responded in February by setting salt-reduction targets, over time, for nine types of food. However, the target set for cereals doesn’t go far enough.

Of those cereals marketed to children in our branded sample, 18 out of 28 contained ‘a lot’ of salt, and only three met the definition for ‘a little’ – Weetabix Ready Brek (original and chocolate) and Quaker Sugar Puffs. Kellogg’s All-Bran, Quaker Oat Krunchies and Nestlé Golden Grahams all contain around 1g salt per suggested serving size. This is four times the amount of salt in a 25g bag of roasted salted peanuts. And it makes up one third of what’s recommended for four- to six-year-olds, one fifth of the suggested daily intake for seven- to ten-year-olds and about 17 per cent of the FSA’s recommended 6g of salt per day for adults.

Vitamins and minerals  Most cereals are fortified with vitamins (mainly B1, B2, niacin and folic acid) and minerals, mainly iron. Generally, fortified cereals will have a higher concentration of those vitamins and minerals than unfortified wholegrain cereals, such as porridge oats and mueslis, but these can be good natural sources of many of the same nutrients as well.

Cereals can be a significant source of vitamins and minerals, particularly for children and teenagers who commonly have diets low in iron and other nutrients, according to the FSA’s National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS). The NDNS also reported that adults get a significant number of important nutrients from eating cereals. Folic acid, iron and vitamin D are very important for women of childbearing age, and breakfast cereals can be a good source of these nutrients.
Fat Many cereals are low in fat. But an appalling nine cereals in our branded sample contained ‘a lot’ of saturated fat, and 13 list ‘hydrogenated’ or ‘partially hydrogenated’ oil or fat in their ingredients. Foods containing hydrogenated fats or oils contain trans fats, which, like saturated fats, have been shown to raise blood cholesterol levels and are linked to an increased risk of heart disease (see Trans fats, October 2003, page 16).

Ten of the 13 cereals listing hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oil in the ingredients were specifically marketed to children. One, Nestlé Lion Cereal, not only contains hydrogenated oil but is also high in saturated fat. It’s the cereal version of the Lion chocolate bar, and not a healthy breakfast choice.

OWN-BRAND CEREALS SNAPSHOT

We also bought a selection of own-brand cereals – including corn flakes, fruit and fibre, rice cereal and frosted flakes – and compared them, using the FSA’s guidelines, to similar branded cereals. We shopped at Tesco, Asda and Waitrose.

On the whole, own-brand cereals have a similar composition to branded products. For instance, all of the corn flakes we looked at contained a lot of salt, but only a little sugar, and a similar amount of fibre.

All the rice cereals had a very similar nutrient content, as did all the frosted flakes. The fruit and fibre-type cereals were more varied. As with Kellogg’s, Tesco and Waitrose products contained a lot of salt and sugar, with Tesco’s also containing a lot of saturated fat. Asda’s contained less salt and would be a better choice.

CEREAL BARS AND OTHER ON-THE-GO PRODUCTS

Many popular cereals such as Kellogg’s Frosties and Nestlé Cheerios are now available as bars. Most are based on the cereal, fortified with calcium, and have added fat to produce a biscuit-type bar. On the surface they appear to be the perfect solution for people in a hurry. But we found otherwise. We bought 11 different bars, and looked at what they contain, compared to a serving (with milk) of their equivalent cereal.

Most of the bars were fortified with vitamins and minerals, so they may be a better choice than other sweet biscuits or snack bars for breakfast. But our expert emphasised that they are not an equivalent substitute for a bowl of cereal, and the higher-fibre, low-fat advantages of cereal are mostly lost.

The bars all provided less energy and less fibre than an equivalent bowl of cereal. Worryingly, seven of the bars (but not the equivalent cereals) contained a lot of saturated fat, as judged by the FSA guidelines per 100g. Ten of the 11 bars also contained hydrogenated oil, compared to four of the cereals. One plus point was that most bars contained less salt than the cereal version.

Cereals that are sold ready-to-eat in individual pots with milk or yogurt, such as Rumblers and Kellogg’s Twinpots, are less commonly available but are similar in composition to equivalent cereals eaten at home.
Meet the White family. Nine-year-old Lewis usually eats a large breakfast of four Weetabix and full-fat milk before school, sometimes with toast as well. He also likes porridge. Imogen, seven, is a fussy eater. She would prefer to eat cereal bars as she doesn’t like milk on her cereal. The children enjoy McVitie’s A:M Cereal Bites, and although mum Cheryl tries to offer them only as mid-morning snacks or after-school treats, they occasionally become the breakfast. Both children drink weak tea.

Dad, Gary, likes Weetabix with full-fat milk or porridge, and cheese on toast.

Cheryl often skips breakfast, or has a bowl of Frosties, an apple or a small bag of peanuts, usually on the go.

Our nutritionist asked each family member to complete a food diary for a day and then analysed their diets.

All the family would benefit from a glass of fresh 100 per cent fruit juice. It can count as one of their five daily portions of fruit and veg, and the vitamin C helps the body to absorb iron from non-animal foods such as cereal or bread. Iron is an essential nutrient and can be in short supply among children and women of childbearing age. Our nutritionist also thought that juice would be preferable to tea for Imogen and Lewis. Tannin in tea reduces iron absorption.

LABELLING

**Serving sizes** If you want to compare different cereals, use the ‘per 100g’ amount listed in the nutrition information box. Some manufacturers include milk in their ‘serving size’, while others don’t. And some serving sizes vary between brands – all making comparisons difficult.

Manufacturers should be consistent and give information per 100g and using a standard serving size, with or without milk.

**Health claims** Many cereals use symbols which imply specific health benefits, including a healthy heart, healthy bones and improved concentration.

While low-fat, high-fibre cereals may have a positive influence on heart health, some making ‘heart health’ claims – for instance, Kellogg’s Coco Pops and Nestlé Force Flakes – contain a lot of salt. High-salt diets are associated with high blood pressure, a key risk factor for heart disease and stroke.
Some Kellogg’s cereals depict symbols representing the benefit of calcium for healthy bones, when it’s the added milk, not the cereal, contributing the bulk of the calcium. This is misleading.

Claims that a cereal can help improve concentration are also ambiguous. There may be links between eating breakfast and better concentration among children, but cereal is not necessarily any better than other foods.

**Salt** Most cereals only list sodium under nutrition information. To work out the salt content, you need to multiply the sodium figure by 2.5. We think that all products should list salt per 100g.

**Hydrogenated oils** At the moment, you need to scour ingredients labels for these – the higher up the list, the more the product contains. We’d like manufacturers to stop using these oils. Until then, trans fats should be labelled along with saturated fats.

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Lewis’s breakfast of Weetabix with milk is a good choice, as it is a high-fibre cereal that’s low in fat, lower in salt and sugar, and should fill him up. Children over five can also have semi-skimmed milk instead of full-fat milk, unless they are very poor eaters. If he is still hungry, Lewis would be better off having fruit or bread instead of Cereal Bites.

Imogen needs to eat more for breakfast. If she won’t eat cereal in a bowl with milk, then our nutritionist suggested that yogurt with cereal added, or even a fortified cereal bar, is better than the few Cereal Bites she currently has. Children often like muesli or crunchy cereals with yogurt, instead of milk. Yogurt is a good food for children, and with added fresh or tinned fruit is a better option than those with ‘jam’ type additions. Imogen could be encouraged to eat a banana or another piece of fruit.

Gary should switch to having his Weetabix with semi-skimmed milk and have jam or marmalade rather than cheese on his toast. This will reduce his saturated fat intake. He could also have some fruit or juice with his breakfast.

Cheryl would benefit from a regular breakfast routine so that she doesn’t slip into the habit of snacking on high-fat foods mid-morning. She should try to include a higher-fibre cereal and fruit juice to help with iron absorption. Our nutritionist believes Imogen will learn many of her eating habits from Cheryl and Gary. Eating breakfast in front of Imogen might encourage her to eat more.

So how did the advice go down? Cheryl told us: ‘It has definitely inspired me to tweak my basic shopping list, to include semi-skimmed milk and orange juice.’
THE BREAKFAST BOWL
LOW-DOWN

We’ve developed a traffic light system to help guide you through the pros and cons of a selection of different types and brands of cereals for adults and children.

CEREALS MARKETED TO CHILDREN
Cereals specifically aimed at children are often marketed using cartoon characters, free gifts, bright colours and novel shapes. Claims about nutritional value are added to entice parents. Sadly, many also tend to be highly processed, sugar-laden and full of salt. While it’s often said that because of the benefits of eating breakfast, even a sugary cereal is preferable to no breakfast at all, still more benefits may be gained from switching to a healthier brand.

CHOOSING A CEREAL FROM THOSE MARKETED TO KIDS
Children often add sugar to their cereal, regardless of how sweet it already is, so lower-sugar cereals are a better choice. And it’s equally important for children to eat cereals with less salt.

Better options for children

- Weetabix Ready Brek (original)
- Weetabix Ready Brek (chocolate)
- Quaker Sugar Puffs
- Nestlé Coco Shreddies, Nestlé Frosted Shreddies
- Kellogg’s Coco Pops Crunchers, Weetabix Weetos

The worst offenders

- Nestlé Lion Cereal
- Kellogg’s Frosties Turbos, Nestlé Cookie Crisp
- Nestlé Golden Grahams
- Kellogg’s Frosties Chocolate, Kellogg’s Hunny B’s, Nestlé Cinnamon Grahams, Nestlé Honey Nut Cheerios
- Kellogg’s Bart Simpson’s Eat My Shorts, Kellogg’s Choco Corn Flakes, Kellogg’s Coco Pops, Kellogg’s Corn Pops, Kellogg’s Frosties, Kellogg’s Rice Krispies, Nestlé Golden Nuggets
- Nestlé Cheerios
CHOOSING CEREALS FOR ADULTS

For adults, the best choices are cereals high in fibre, with minimal levels of sugar or salt. Cereals containing a lot of saturated fat or trans fats are not good choices.

Better choices for adults

- Nestlé Shredded Wheat, Nestlé Shredded Wheat Bitesize, Quaker Oatso Simple (original), all types of plain porridge oats (including organic)
- Weetabix, Weetabix Organic
- Jordans Original Crunchy (raisin & almonds, tropical fruits)
- Jordans Nature’s Wholegrain (honey nut, maple & pecan), Kellogg’s All-Bran Apricot Bites, Quaker Oatso Simple (flavoured varieties), Weetabix Alpen (blackberry & apple, no added sugar, nutty crunch, original, strawberry, wheat flakes), Weetabix Mini Crunch (banana, chocolate, fruit & nut)
- Kellogg’s Crunchy Nut Feast Honey & Nut, Weetabix Alpen (Caribbean crunch), Jordans Country Crisp (luxury raisins, wild about berries), Jordans Luxury Crunchy (golden honey & nut)

Not so good

- Kellogg’s Crispix, Kellogg’s Crunchy Nut

Besides any other pros or cons, all these cereals are worth highlighting because they contain a lot of saturated fat:

- Kellogg’s Cornflakes Banana Crunch, Kellogg’s Crunchy Nut Clusters Milk Chocolate Curls, Jordans Country Crisp (four nut combo), Jordans Country Crisp (real strawberry, whole raspberry), Jordans Organic Four Berry Crisp, Jordans Organic Crunchy Raisins & Coconut, Quaker Harvest Nut Crunch Collection
- Kellogg’s Crunchy Nut Red
- Nestlé Clusters

Besides any other pros or cons, worth highlighting because of their very high salt content:

- Kellogg’s All-Bran, Quaker Oat Krunchies
CALLING FOR ACTION

Eating the right breakfast can provide a big health boost to your daily diet. Cereals can help with energy levels and provide vitamins, minerals and fibre. But many don’t deserve this healthy image. Manufacturers and retailers should do more to reduce the fat, salt and sugar in breakfast cereals, and aim to eliminate trans fats, particularly in children’s products. Legislation is needed to prevent foods high in fat, sugar or salt from misleadingly carrying health claims or being fortified. We’d like labelling of all foods to improve so that the salt content is obvious and trans fats are included in the nutritional information with saturates. We’d also like the FSA to develop a scheme, like our traffic light system, to be used on all food products, making it easier for consumers to make healthier choices.
12 demands

to government and industry to tackle
obesity and diet related disease

1  Government to prioritise nutrition policy by establishing a Nutrition Council

2  Government to set clear goals to reduce obesity in children and adults

3  Introduction of a ‘Children’s Watershed’ for food advertising

4  A Food Standards Agency/industry standard on responsible marketing of food targeted at children

5  Introduction of a school food standard

6  Introduction of a ‘national nutrition labelling scheme’ by 2005 to identify foods high in fat, sugar and salt to enable consumers to make informed choices about what they eat

7  Government to support tighter controls over foods that are presented as healthy

8  Manufacturers, retailers and caterers to reduce fat, sugar and salt levels in foods

9  Government to examine financial incentives to manufacturers and retailers to lower levels of fat, sugar and salt in foods and disincentives for products high in fat, sugar and salt

10  UK supermarkets to make it easier for consumers to choose healthy options

11  Scrap the CAP so that we have a consumer-focused food policy rather than a producer-driven agriculture policy

12  Launch of a hard hitting, innovative campaign by government to change UK eating habits

www.which.co.uk/campaigns
Which? campaigns actively for all consumers. With around 700,000 members in the UK, we are the largest consumer organisation in Europe. Entirely independent of government and industry, we are funded through sales of our consumer magazines, online products and books.

This report was published in 2004 by Consumers Association. Since October 2004 we have been campaigning under the name of Which?

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