

graze



The

psychology

of snacking

2024 REPORT

Introduction

Hello and welcome to the graze Psychology of Snacking report¹. A peek into Britain's discretionary eating habits.

Food is a substance that stimulates all of our senses and, from our very first moments as a baby, is intimately interwoven into our lives, setting the rhythm of our life. This makes the science and psychology of food choice and preference as fascinating as it is complex.

It's also largely hidden. We often think that we are making clear, rational decisions when we select a food to buy and eat. But that is rarely the case. So much of what shapes our food choices sits below the level of our conscious awareness.

Kimberley Wilson
Chartered psychologist and
nutrition expert

¹ All statistics used in this report are from a survey commissioned by graze consisting of 2000 adults aged 18+. This was conducted by 3gem in May 2024.

The snacks we eat

To understand the psychology of snacking, it's first important to know what people choose to snack on. And graze's research revealed a snacking landscape that was, at least from a health perspective, fragmented and perhaps surprising for some.

Occupying the top three spots for Britain's favourite snacks were chocolate, voted by 65% of people; potato crisps, voted by 60% of people; and biscuits, voted by 55% of people. All of these snacks are typically associated with unhealthy options, i.e. high in saturated fats and sugars. No surprises here.

But it's once you move down beyond the podium that the landscape becomes less predictable. From fourth through to sixth place are all snacks that are typically (although not exclusively) perceived as healthier options: fresh fruit (53%) and yoghurt (39%).

Chartered psychologist and nutrition expert Kimberley Wilson says:

65%

of people voted chocolate as their favourite snack

“The composition of certain foods can measurably affect how they make us feel. Humans have an inbuilt preference for sugar as part of our evolutionary drive to survive, and because our very hungry brains run on glucose. For this reason sugar, especially in combination with fat, is linked to [hedonic hunger](#)², the drive to eat for the sake of pleasure rather than the need to take on nutrients. I suspect this goes some way to explain why chocolate was the most popular snack.”

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²<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK53528/>

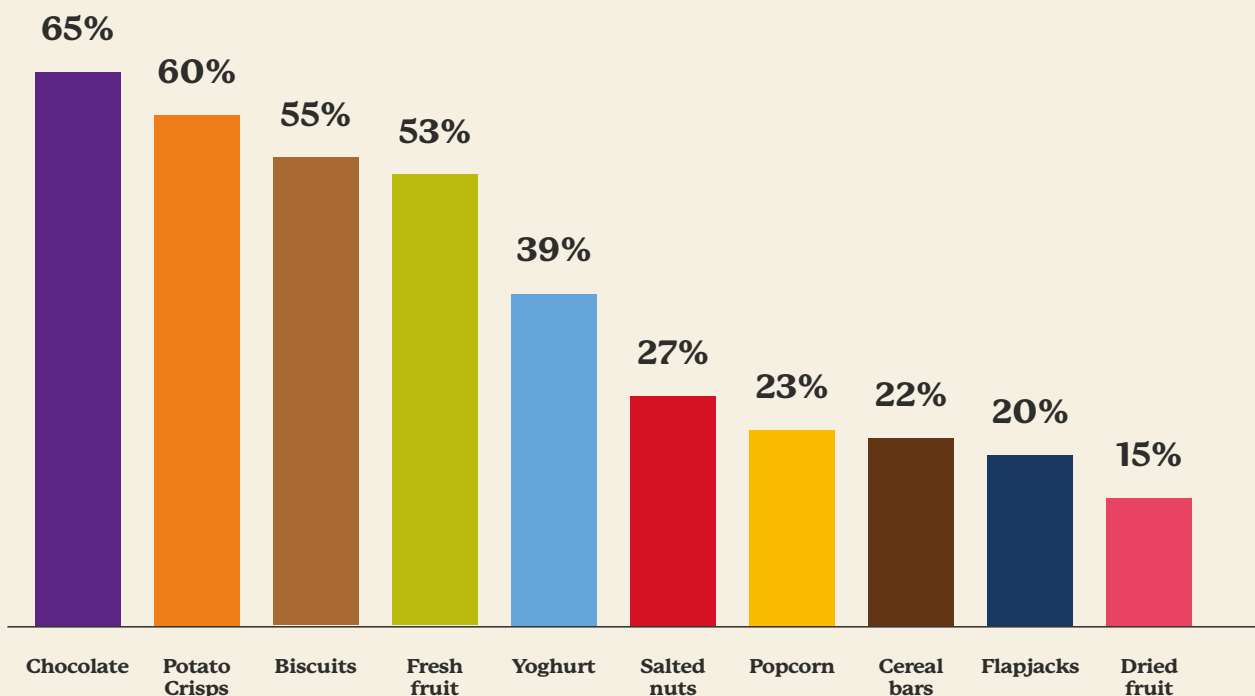
The snacks we eat

It's also important to consider that people choose different snacks according to the time of day. Graze's research shows that snacks eaten before lunch tend to be healthier, whereas those consumed in the afternoon or before bedtime are much more likely to be unhealthy.

Kimberley comments: "This may indicate [decision fatigue](#)³. Each decision the brain makes costs energy, and the more complex the decision, the more energy is required.

Now, think about the sheer complexity of a snack choice. Am I hungry? How hungry am I? Should I have something now or wait for my next meal? How much time do I have? How far is the shop? Savoury or sweet? What time am I having dinner? And on and on. At the start of the day, with a fresh, well-rested brain, it is easier to make the often more difficult choice (longer term health over short-term pleasure) but by the end of the day, with our decision-making energy depleted, we're much more likely to choose instant gratification."

The foods that people most enjoy eating



Snacks eaten before lunch tend to be healthier, whereas those consumed in the afternoon or before bedtime are much more likely to be unhealthy.

³<https://www.sciencegate.app/document/10.1108/bfj-05-2016-0227>

The choices we make

So what prompts people to snack in the first place? Why do we choose specific snacks? And what influences our choices to eat them?

Despite diverse motivations, the research made one thing very clear: taste is the #1 reason that people choose to eat specific snacks.

The snacks that people referred to as their favourites almost directly correlated with those that they referred to as the tastiest. 65% referred to chocolate as a snack they enjoy; 65% referred to it as tasty. 55% referred to biscuits as foods they enjoy, 51% referred to them as tasty. This trend applies for all the other snacks that graze's research covered.

Kimberley comments:
 “Ultimately, taste is the most straight-forward way for your brain and body to make a food choice. If a food

34%

“Our brains are acutely sensitive to food cues ... one in three of us (34%) saying just the sight of food in a shop can trigger a desire to snack”

tastes good it will often make us feel good. Even better if the food that tastes good and feels good is nourishing too.”

Otherwise, graze's research revealed an array of different motivations that prompted people to snack. The most popular reason that people cited was ‘to relax and unwind’, alone or with someone else, perhaps while watching the TV (41%). Following that, high proportions of people said that they choose to snack because they're bored (38%), because they need something to carry them over until their next meal (36%), because they want a tasty treat to indulge in (36%), or because they want to cheer themselves up (34%).

A variety of triggers can increase the likelihood of snacking. The most common trigger, cited by 36% of people, was simply seeing snacks at home. Close behind, 34% of people mentioned seeing snacks in shops as a trigger. Other common triggers included talking about food (29%) and even just watching others eat (25%).

“Our brains are acutely sensitive to ‘food cues’ (references to food and signals of opportunities to eat) in the environment. Our brains want to make sure we have enough energy on board ‘just in case’. We see this in the report with one in three (34%) of us saying just the sight of food in a shop can trigger a desire to snack”, says Kimberley Wilson.

It is important to note, though, that we do not make our choices inside vacuums. Our environments play an important role too. Given that 73% of people in Graze's research reported that unhealthy snacks were more affordable than healthy ones, it is no surprise that over 6 in 10 Brits (62%) admit to picking

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The choices we make

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up sugary snacks during their weekly food shop.

These are all factors that contribute to the majority of people’s choice to have unhealthy snacks more readily available at home than healthy ones. And when they’re more easily available at home, as we’ve seen, they’re more likely to trigger someone to snack.

On this, Kimberley comments: “We don’t encounter food in a completely neutral environment. Indeed, there is no such thing. The food environment – which encompasses everything from the foods in your cupboards to TV advertising and electronic billboards at bus stops (and much more) – shapes our food choices.

And while that typically takes the form of less healthy options, we have [good evidence](#)⁴ that when other, healthier options are available, prominent and easy to access, we go for those.

These environmental nudges can help consumers to make choices that are more in line with their long-term personal goals (rather than short-term satisfaction) and [public health](#)⁵ recommendations like reducing sugar consumption, and eating more sources of fibre like wholegrains (e.g. oats), nuts and legumes (peas and beans.)”

**Taste is the
#1 reason that
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^{4&5}<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-nutrition/article/nudging-consumers-towards-healthier-choices-a-systematic-review-of-positional-influences-on-food-choice/3D7DE450C7FEB6844E79D773C92A8B14>

The emotions we experience

We've covered the reasons why people choose to snack, as well as the reasons we choose to eat specific snacks. But how do our motivations match up with the way those snacks make us feel?

On the face of it, it appears that the majority of people (65%) choose to eat unhealthy snacks because they deliver instant gratification. But once we dug a little deeper, it became clear that our feelings associated with the health values of our snacks were a lot more complicated than that.

Most people, it turns out, associate healthy snacks with more positive

feelings. 43% of people reported feeling 'happy' after eating healthy foods, while only 16% reported feeling so after eating unhealthy ones. Likewise, 29% reported feeling 'nourished' after eating healthy snacks and only 9% felt so after eating unhealthy ones.

On the other side of the same coin, people associate unhealthier foods with more negative feelings. 27% felt guilty after eating them, 21% felt naughty (although we recognise there might be an appeal to this for some), and 19% felt regret. Women are significantly more likely to experience these feelings than men.

Kimberley Wilson says: "On top of the innate pleasure for certain foods and flavours, we **learn how to feel** about food from the people and food culture that surrounds us. When desirable foods are couched in moral language ('bad', 'forbidden' 'guilty pleasure') as they so often are, we may begin to inappropriately use these labels on ourselves.

Conversely, feeling positive after eating healthy foods is likely to reflect that these choices are congruent to our values, such as looking after our health and wellbeing or feeling virtuous. Our brains may also make positive associations with foods that are nourishing, that can contribute to a feeling of contentment."

If that's the case though, it makes another discovery from our research all the more surprising...

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The snack injustice we must overcome

When asked, the majority (56%) of people reported eating unhealthy foods more often than healthy ones. Since people associate unhealthy foods less often with positive emotions and more often with negative ones, this seems... well, contradictory.

And here we come to the great snack injustice of our time: **the widespread misperception that healthier foods cannot be tasty too.** In fact, 67% of people said that they'd expect a snack that tasted good not to be good for them in graze's research. 62% of people consider unhealthy snacks to be tastier than healthy ones.

"We should be able to do it all: to eat delicious, satisfying foods that also provide our brains and bodies with essential nutrition that we can feel good about. The challenge is overcoming much of the social conditioning from a lifetime of food marketing that says that delicious = indulgent (usually meaning high in salt, fat and sugar). **But what if fresh could mean bright, fresh flavours? Or if our sweet**

'pick me up' comes with extra fibre without compromising taste? The

more opportunity people have to choose delicious and nutritious foods the easier it will be to make healthier snack choices" - Kimberley Wilson

The behaviours we've explored have shed light on the nation's snacking habits, revealing a clear gap between the desire for a healthy lifestyle and the availability and appeal of healthy snacks. Our findings underscore the need for nourishing, satisfying, and deliciously tasty food. **This is why graze is on a mission to dispel the myth that healthier foods can't be tasty and to restore faith in healthy snacking**—helping people feel good about enjoying delicious foods while realigning the misconception that healthy can't be tasty.

And here we come to the great snack injustice of our time: **the widespread misperception that healthier foods cannot be tasty too.**

Graze is on a mission to rectify this fallacy and restore faith in healthy snacking - to help people feel good when they eat and to realign the misunderstanding that healthy can't be tasty.