

Ready-meals are 'nutritionally chaotic' study finds

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(Medical Xpress) -- Supermarket ready-meals are 'nutritionally chaotic', according to a study by scientists at the University of Glasgow which calls for improvements to be made.

Researchers led by Professor Mike Lean, Chair of Nutrition in the School of Medicine, looked at four different ready-[meals](#) across four different ranges at the five major UK [supermarket](#) chains of Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury, Morrisons and the Co-op.

The energy contents of macaroni cheese, lasagne, cottage pie and chicken tikka masala ready-meals across the healthy, value, normal and special ranges, where available, were examined. In addition, the nutritional information for energy, salt, sugar and saturated fat levels in the different meals and ranges from Tesco were examined in more detail.

The researchers determined the acceptable energy content of a 'meal' should be 500-700kcal – around 30 per cent of the Guideline Daily Amount (GDA) for a woman as specified by the Food Standards Agency. For the meal to be nutritionally-balanced, 30 per cent of the GDA should be present for all other nutrients.

The results varied widely: of the 67 'meals' tested, almost half (32) did not contain enough calories to constitute a meal, while others (10) had over 700kcal.

Tesco's Chicken Tikka and Korma with rice contains 1,395kcal per serving, with 98 per cent GDA for saturated fat and 80 per cent GDA for salt, while its 'value' Shepherd's Pie only has 210kcal per serving.

In many cases, the various supermarkets' special or finest ranges contain 80-100 per cent GDA for saturated fat. The ready-meals chosen were all sold as 'meals' with no instructions to add any other ingredients in order to achieve nutritional balance. Some packaging even showed vegetables which were not included in the ready-meal.

Prof Lean said: "A consumer with some understanding of nutrition and GDAs might realise these meals are unsuitable for normal or regular consumption, however, a manufacturer could easily modify the recipes to satisfy nutritional criteria without reference to the retailer or consumer.

"There is little justification for providing nutritionally unbalanced meals if they can be improved and remain attractive and affordable."

The UK ready-meal market is worth more than £26 billion annually but regular consumption of convenience foods has been associated with less healthy diets, obesity and as well as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer.

Prof Lean proposes steps to establishing agreed nutritional standards for ready-meals, including:

- Establishing a sensible size for all meals unless labelled otherwise (i.e. a notional standard of 600kcal) with a sensible range of +/- 100kcal,
- Assuring the public that, unless otherwise stated, all meals are nutritionally balanced for all nutrients – i.e. same GDA as for

energy,

- Establishing agreement that no meal should contain more than 10 per cent GDA above the per cent GDA for energy, salt or [saturated fat](#),
- Ensuring that all caterers have basic training in nutrition and use of nutrient-content tables,
- Agreeing to independent random checking of nutrient content of meals.

Prof Lean said: “Perceptions of busy lifestyles and time-scarcity have resulted in a shift away from traditional family meals towards convenience foods, but these are often high in dietary fat, calories and sodium and low in fruits, vegetables, fibre, calcium and iron.

“Generating simple standards for ready-meals would cost little, upset few and would help consumers. The need for food manufacturers to consider nutrition should be pretty obvious by now.”

The study, ‘Time-scarcity, ready-meals, ill-health and the obesity epidemic’ is published in the journal *Trends in Food Science & Technology*.

More information: [www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ...
ii/S0924224412001173](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0924224412001173)

Provided by University of Glasgow

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