

Panic in the kitchen: UK digests new fruit and veg advice

April 4 2014, by Alice Ritchie

It was with a heavy heart, and some panic, that Britons digested new advice this week that their struggle to eat enough fruit and vegetables had just got harder.

Over the past decade, Britain has absorbed if not adopted the idea of five a day, the target endorsed by the state-run National Health Service (NHS) for a healthy, balanced diet.

But now researchers at University College London (UCL) [have advised this should be increased to at least seven](#) to cut the risk of death from cancer or heart disease.

The recommendation is directly aimed at Britain, which has one of the highest rates of heart disease in Europe, a fact blamed in part on a diet high in fat and sugar.

Questions have been raised about the results but they have sparked a flurry of debate in a land which, while no longer fuelled by sausages and chips, still has some way to go.

Only around a quarter of adults currently manage five a day, according to National Health Service (NHS) data, while other research puts the figure at one in 10.

"Are they having a laugh?" wrote one newspaper commentator in response to the UCL results, echoing people around the country as they

surveyed the dismal contents of their fridges.

"I can't even do five a day, let alone seven. It's an early grave for me," said one woman on popular parenting website Mumsnet, where the issue was trending this week.

Another added, with an air of fatalism: "I don't much like fruit, my daughter doesn't much like veg. My husband likes doughnuts."

For all Britain's top restaurants, the celebrity chefs and television cooking programmes on virtual loop, Britons have firm tastes—and they are not for fruit and vegetables.

The nation eats 6.4 billion sandwiches and consumes ready meals on 1.6 billion occasions every year, according to a recent survey by research group Kantar Worldpanel.

Add to that more than 1.1 billion pizzas, 1.6 billion pies and pasties, 1.5 billion roast dinners, 578 million bowls of spaghetti bolognese and 308 million plates of lasagne, and the national picture is clear.

'People will give up'

Britain introduced the five-a-day campaign in 2002, based on a recommendation from the World Health Organisation of a daily intake of 400 grammes of fruit and veg a day.

The WHO said this amount—equivalent to five 80-gramme (three-ounce) portions—would help prevent [heart disease](#), cancer, diabetes and obesity, as well as nutritional deficiencies.

The message caught on and was adapted around the world, from the "More matters" campaign in the United States—where 36 percent of

adults are obese—to the "Go for two (fruit) and five (veg)" in Australia.

But experts warn that eating well is not just a matter of choice, and there are concerns that moving the goalposts may be counter-productive.

"We're managing to eat two, maybe three portions a day. If you start recommending unrealistic targets, my fear is that some people would just give up," said Azmina Govindji of the British Dietetic Association.

She told AFP: "When you start to give blanket advice to a population, where there are cost issues, there are time issues... we've got to be realistic.

"My advice would be—focus on what you're eating today and try to add one more portion."

The cost of fresh [fruit and vegetables](#) has gone up by about 30 percent in the past six years and is 19 percent more expensive than the EU average, according to the food ministry.

This increase has coincided with a squeeze on incomes during the recession, and it is perhaps no surprise that the poorest households are eating both less [fruit](#) and veg than the richest and less than they did before the financial crash.

Jonathan Firth, business unit director at Kantar Worldpanel, says the trend is towards healthier food, and diets are likely to improve with the economic situation.

"We have become more self-aware. That's not to say that we've necessarily as a nation got a really healthy diet, we're just trying to take steps towards that," he told AFP.

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