Insight Pack – 5-a-Day

*Based on research undertaken by the NSMC in 2007/2008*
Snacking

Overall, participants felt that they and their children undertook quite a lot of snacking throughout the day. This snacking varied from healthy eating such as fruit, to high consumption of crisps, and commonly chocolate. Some snacking was healthy with participants saying that they commonly ate fruit such as apples and bananas. The reason explained behind snacking on fruit was that it was quick and convenient.

- It’s easier to snack on fruit
- If I’ve got a really busy day I’ll just snack, I’ll go to the shop, get my ... get me an apple or whatever I fancy. I’ll just quickly grab it eat it and that’s it.

However, although some participants had healthy snacks, it was more common for participants to snack on foods such as crisps and chocolate. The reasons cited for these types of snacks were similar to reasons for fruit snacking, such as convenience, speed and also taste.

- I have a snack about 11 o’clock. Sometimes I have a packet of crisps and a cup of coffee
- My favourite snacks are Mars and then ready salted crisps.

Parents felt that their children followed fairly similar snacking routines to themselves with a range of healthy and unhealthy snacks given.

- Well when she leaves here, she'll go in the shop and buy three packets of crisps and a drink, which she'll eat, she'll go home, when she gets home, she’ll eat a small bit of chocolate, then she'll eat all her tea, and then after tea she’ll have an apple, and grapes or orange or whatever foods going
Pester Power – children’s influence over their meal

A common observation arising from the focus groups conducted was that, in general, children have a high level of influence over what they eat through ‘pester power’ tactics. Corresponding with some of the stress that mothers reported in their daily routines, such as getting their children ready for school, pressure is also exerted at meal times. Some mothers felt that children criticise the food they cook and in some cases will refuse to eat a particular meal. As discussed later in this section, parents are anxious for their children to eat something and this desire to feed them can manifest in them serving what their child wants, rather than what might be good for them. Quarrels at meal times can lead parents to feel that getting their children to eat healthily is a ‘battle’.

- *I can do mashed potato, peel the spuds and … but Scott won’t eat it because it’s not the same as school mash, they use packet mash.*
- *Mum can I have this, Mum I’d rather have this, do you know what I mean, and it’s just constant, they just constantly moan at me, we don’t like your cooking, we don’t like your cleaning do you know what I mean?*
- *It’s a constant battle and arguments and hell is tea time to get them to eat something*

Some parents observe that this pressure from children is acutely manifested when food shopping, where children try to influence their parents to purchase certain food products.

- *Yeah, I take my kids shopping, but it works out a lot of stress, but as soon as it comes to like the chocolate department, or crisps, all hell breaks loose*
Highlighting the power that children can have over their parents, some participants felt strongly that you shouldn’t give a child something they don’t want to eat. This area was debated between participants, with others strongly holding the view that children need to eat a balanced diet regardless of whether they wanted to or not.

- **You can’t make kids eat what they don’t want to eat.**

A clear finding from the groups was that many parents felt that it was important that their child ‘ate something’ rather than important that they eat either the prepared meal or fruit and vegetables. Stories were told which described children not eating dinner being then being sent to their room, only for the parent to ‘give in’ and let the child have something to eat which they wanted. The guilt of a child not eating was difficult for parents to contend with and therefore they tended to give into their children’s pester power. Some participants felt that it was the eating that is important, rather than what is ate by their children. Although participants may want their children to eat a healthy diet, this is a secondary concern to them eating enough.

- **And it all depends what they feel like, when they open that lunch box, they might think oh you know, I don't feel like that today, I'll eat that… as long as my daughter is eating, you know, not, not all junk, but as long as my daughter is eating then that’s all I’m bothered about**
- **See I like to do, try and make sure that my kids eat three times a day, and as long as they eat, cause like I say, they're picky, I'm alright.**
Presence of treating

As a consequence of the high levels of control some children have over their meals, some parents undertake trading or treating practices to encourage them to eat certain meals. For example, if they finish their vegetables, then they can have an ice cream.

- *They have their tea, then they'll have their fruit, then they'll have a yogurt, then they'll have a treat*
- *It's like giving him his (peas) or something and saying, look if you eat that then he'll have something nice after your tea*

The concern for these treating practices is that they can position the healthily option as the undesirable one and the unhealthier food, such as chocolates and cakes as the desirable and positive one. Framing fruit and vegetables in this way is likely to influence children’s consumption.

- *I tend to buy chocolates and cakes as a treat. I do buy them but not very often, crisps and things and that’s like a treat.*

Many examples were provided of parents or schools giving their children a choice between healthy and unhealthy foods.

- *In reception and nursery, right, if your kids don't eat fruit or vegetables they'll give you biscuits*
- *I mean to me, I think its their choice but, you see if you give them the option in their lunch box and its up to the child, do they prefer that bit of chocolate, or do they prefer [ANOTHER OPTION] because I mean, they do get the choice. I mean, sometimes XXX will eat the fruit thing, or he'll come back and just eat the chocolate, so I mean it’s his choice …if he fancied it*

Some participants felt that, given the choice, sometimes a child would pick a healthy option and other times, the unhealthy one. However, the stronger and more common views were that children would be more likely to pick the unhealthy option.
• If its biscuit or fruit, most child go for biscuits
• You put fruit and veg in and stuff and whatever, a cooked dinner, they’d probably, oh, I don’t really like this, I’d rather have some chips.
• If I put a chocolate, say, or an orange or banana, whatever fruit, my kids will definitely pick the chocolate out of whatever. Definitely.

Although some participants consciously gave their children the choice between different foods, at the same time they felt that their parents would not have done the same thing for them. A general perception arising from the groups was that there was less choice around when they were younger.

• I was just saying that, though, this is the difference in all the young ones, like when we was young if you didn’t have your dinner you’d get nothing else.

A consequence of the increased choice given to children is that it can result in parents having to cook a number of different meals to cater for different tastes. This has a number of knock on effects. It can shorten the time parents have to prepare meals and also make meal times an ordeal for parents.

• I think that’s part of it you’ve got to prepare four different meals a day

Rational behind choice
Part of the rationale for giving children choice over their meals was the feeling that you wouldn’t force an adult to eat something they didn’t like, so why would you force a child?

• See you wouldn’t as a an adult expect, like I wouldn’t expect you if I’d got something, for you to go and say, you’re going to sit there and you’re going to eat it, because why, why do they treat children like it

Some participants felt that what you eat depends on what mood you are in – for example, many cited the desire for warm food in cold weather.
Therefore, some felt it was not fair to get children to eat something that they may not be in the mood for and that meals should be determined by what you fancy rather than what you might need.

- You've got to plan, on the morning, what they want for dinner, so we might get to dinner time and think oh I've been planning ham sandwich all day and I feel like a cheese sandwich
- I just go for what I want to eat that day. That’s all I go by.

Another reason given for why some parents are content to give their children choice is that they feel that, given time, they will choose the healthier option.

- You say to your child, here, this is something new, do you want to try it, and they're like, I don't like it, but you know that six weeks down the line, they might be saying oh, can I have some more of that

**Restricting choice**

Generally, those parents who did not feel that giving children choice over their meals was correct were likely to attempt to restrict the choice available to their children. Some of this reasoning was explained by the admission that they themselves would be more likely to go for an unhealthy option if given the choice.

- I try not to buy crisps and chocolates because if they’re there I’ll go for the cupboard on Saturday night.
- I tend not to buy the chocolate and the crisps.
Food Purchasing

Frequency of shop
Weekly shopping was the most common frequency for group participants. Most tended to pick up bits on bobs throughout the week; however these were mainly to supplement the one ‘big’ shop that they did. There was variation in the shopping habits of participants, with some shopping every day or two, and others (although rarely mentioned) shopping monthly. Reasons for frequency included the type of food required and the form of transport taken.

Weekly Shops:
Most participants that took part in the research tended to do a weekly ‘big’ shop.

- *I do one big shop every week, fill the freezer, fill the fridge, basically because of work, work and children. So we just go up to ASDA, park the car, put the little one in a trolley, do a big shop, come home, unpack it and that’s the end of it sort of thing.*

Part of the rationale behind undertaking a weekly shop was that it helped participants to schedule a time into their routine to get a large amount of shopping over and done with.

- *Whereas if you’re working then you’ve got other things to do in the house, you just tend to go and do your weekly shop, don’t you, in one day, and it’s done, and, like you say, just get your bits and bobs as you go along.*

Monthly Shops:
Some participants mentioned that they undertook monthly food shops. Monthly shops were seen as favourable because they tended to fit in with how people are paid and therefore people could match the large shop to when they were assured of having money in the bank. Monthly shops were also cited as being good for ‘stocking up’ on frozen foods in a large quantity.

- *I do monthly shops and then I just get bits every week, so I'll go there every month and spend, say hundred quid in there*
Frequency of Fruit and Vegetable Purchase

As might be expected, there were large variances in the purchase frequency of fruit and vegetables, and this was strongly influenced by participants' attitudes towards them. Participants ranged from buying fruit and vegetables daily, weekly, to very rarely at all. Whether someone eats fruit and vegetables regularly obviously affected their frequency of purchase, those who don’t eat, tend not to buy at all. Frequent fruit and vegetable eaters tended to shop more frequently to replenish supplies that ran out. However, if due to financial, access or time constraints among others, some participants that ran out of fruit and vegetables had to wait until their next shop to purchase more. Some of those shoppers that tended to buy one shop per week reported that, on occasions, the fruit and vegetables they bought would go off and be wasted – the issue of waste is explored further in this report.

Several participants stated that more frequent food purchasing could lead to fresher fruit and vegetables and therefore a higher quantity of fruit and vegetable consumption. A consequence of less frequent purchasing could be that participants do not purchase or eat as many fresh foods as packaged and more easily storable goods.

- Well, I think that’s probably, like you say, if you shop once a week, and that’s why you don’t eat so much fresh food in the week if you work.

Travel arrangements also have a large impact on frequency of fruit and vegetable consumption. If participants had good access to transport they might be able to buy it more frequently. Frequent shopping through public transport could be prohibitively expensive; therefore some participants didn’t want to waste money on frequent travel to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables.

- I don’t want to waste money on bus fare everyday; otherwise …I’d go up every day, for like, fruit and salad.
Views towards fruit and vegetables

There was a mixed response to fruit and vegetables among the participants. Generally, the positive and negative views were balanced, with some participants stating that they ‘love’ or ‘hate’ fruit and vegetables. As would be expected, those who do not like fruit and vegetables, tend not to eat them. There were also differences in views towards the type of fruit and vegetable. For example, some participants mentioned that they only liked potatoes or others only liking salad but not vegetables. The quotes below provide a flavour of some of the positive and negative views towards fruit and vegetables.

Positive Views:
- I get two big bags of oranges a week, two bags of apples a week, strawberries, bananas, grapes, all sorts really
- I like plenty of veg. My husband loves salad. He’d have it every day if I put it, but I said, ooh, it’s too cold, but I’m not a salad love
- My husband, he could eat a lot of potatoes, so he’d have potato and veg and no meat. He would be happy with that. He loves his fruit
- It don’t last that long in our house… You buy a week’s supply and it’s gone in two days.
- I eat more vegetables than I do fruit, I’ll eat fruit if it’s in the house, I like oranges, and I like um, citrus and er like tropical fruit as well

Negative Views:
- You know what I don’t eat veg and I don’t eat fruit, I eat the crapest food
- Well we don’t really have fruit in our house
- My husband won’t eat fruit. He’ll eat plenty of veg but I can’t get him to eat fruit at all.
- Well if I fancy it I’ll have it, but very rarely
Perceived benefits and drawbacks of fruit and vegetables

The perceived benefits and negative aspects of fruit and vegetable consumption were explored in the focus groups. On balance, participants felt that the positives outweighed the negatives and generally saw benefits to eating them. The main reason that participants cited was a general ‘healthy’ feeling, the perception that they were ‘good for you’. When asked to describe what this ‘healthiness’ was and what it meant, participants were generally unable to elaborate stating simply a healthier feeling was achieved. This section summarises some of the perceived benefits that fruit and vegetable consumption may bring:

**Benefits:**

- **Good for your ‘health’** – for example you might not get as many colds
- **It’s more healthy**, Yeah it’s good for your heart that fatty food, all those fatty foods, it’s no good for you
- **My children haven’t had half as many colds as other children I know that don’t eat five a day. My niece and nephew only have probably one ... per day and they’ve always got coughs, colds, bugs, everything, hardly any for my children. It’s got to do something.**
- **If you read the paper some of them can be anti cancerous can’t they? They can ... tomatoes especially, but potassium in your bananas and things like that. Also higher water content as well. They’ve got their own natural sugars which are supposed to be better for you than eating a chocolate bar or a cake or something, isn’t it? That’s what they say about it.**
- **You generally feel better**
  - It feels as if it does you good even if it doesn’t.
  - **Feel better, look better, to me only a personal opinion, you look better, feel better, you just, as an individual you just, you feel a lot better in yourself. I feel better picking up a plate of apple or kiwi fruit or something than having a chocolate bar. Because I know it’s going to do me better in the long run. Do you understand?**
- **Good for you appearance** – can be good for your skin and hair.
- **You get better skin for a start**
**Drawbacks:**

- **Doesn’t give you as much energy as other foods** – for example, chocolate
- You get more energy out of a chocolate bar than you do fruit.
- I feel more better when I’ve had a chocolate. It gives me more energy and I feel like I’m all right.
- **Doesn’t have the same taste and appeal as alternatives**
  - Yeah, it’s definitely the taste and I just like it, and I feel like it gives me more energy after I’ve ate two bags of crisps and a chocolate.
- I absolutely think nothing’s appealing
- **They aren’t filling**
  - So you need to fill them up, and fruit and veg don’t always fill
- **More boring than alternatives**
  - I think boring colours, say if things like green, you think that’s not very appetising

**Uncertainty surrounding the benefits of fruit and vegetables**

Some participants felt that there was too much pressure from the Government to lead healthy lifestyles, referring to the country being ‘mad’ at the amount of pressure given. In addition, there was some skepticism at the benefits of fruit and vegetables, such as whether or not they give you good skin. As highlighted in the quote below, some participants doubted whether the rhetoric of the benefits of fruit and vegetables matched the reality.

- That’s all they can say, isn’t it, you can’t say it will keep cancer away or things like that because nobody knows, do they?

In addition, some participants noted that they received mixed messages from the media about fruit and vegetables.

- They tell you on telly now that chocolate’s just as good for you as fruit.
Frozen fruit and vegetables

Many participants in the groups stated that they ate frozen fruit and vegetables. However, this behaviour was not universal, with some groups divided between those who were very positive about frozen fruit and vegetables compared with those negative. This section summarises some of the key aspects that participants found positive and negative about frozen fruit and vegetables.

Positive views towards frozen:

- It is convenient to store and quick to prepare
- You’ve got it there, it is convenient.
- Some feel the fruit and vegetables are fresher – it isn’t too different to fresh, and some feel it is better quality
- If you freeze it straight away everything’s packed into it
- Well fresh but they said you’re better off having frozen than having something that’s gone stale really. If you have vegetables that have gone stale, the vitamins have all gone out so you’re better off having frozen.
- Good price – this is especially important if you are feeding a family
- If you’ve got a few kids, to get them to have fruit and veg you buy the frozen, because you can get to Iceland, and their fruit, their veg, you can buy a big bag for £1.
- It is a good back-up in case you run out of fresh fruit and vegetables in the week
- We always keep it in case …
- And a lot of people just shop once a week now, so they buy it, like frozen veg, because if you shop on a Friday, you want to cook a dinner on a Wednesday, you can’t buy fresh veg, can you?
- Helps with wastage – gives you ability to select how much you need and doesn’t go off
- And you ain’t going to waste none of that because you’ll just get a bit out and put that back in the freezer. But if you buy it fresh that goes off very quickly.
Negative views towards frozen:

- Sometimes **the vegetables can be watery**
- *They’re sometimes watery, aren’t they?*
- *They’re slimy aren’t they?*
- **Doesn’t taste as fresh** as fresh fruit and vegetables
- *Frozen stuff you can treat it right but you just know it’s been frozen and the fresh stuff you can just taste is fresh.*

Views towards 5 A-Day

Recognition of 5-a-day was almost universal in the groups – most participants had heard of 5-a-day and had a perceived rough understanding of what it meant. Most participants felt the message was to eat 5 portions, although what constituted a portion was unclear. In addition, the mix of fruit and vegetables within the 5-a-day was uncertain – does it mean just 5 fruit?

- *Well, we know we should eat five a day, don’t we?*
- *You’re supposed to have five fruits a day*

In general, there was uncertainty about what a ‘portion’ was. Some participants had an idea of the correct Department of Health measure of a portion:

- *I’d say an apple or an orange*
- *They say a portion’s about a handful, don’t they?*
- *It hasn’t got to be a solid piece of fruit has it, cause it can be a fruit juice as long as it’s puree fruit juice*

However, some believed that a ‘portion’ could be defined as a ‘piece’ such as a slice of fruit or vegetable. So as long as they or their children had 5 slices, or a few grapes, they would achieve the target.

- *So, to get them to have their five pieces of fruit, you only need them to have a couple of slices of apple, banana, your grapes, your oranges… it’s like a fruit salad just all cut up*
- *It’s five slices, slices.*
Who Eats 5 A-Day?

Participants were asked to describe what kind of people they felt ate 5-a-day. When doing so, in general, participants described people who were different to them – people that were more affluent, health conscious or a different nationality.

- More affluent people
- *Posh and Becks ((laughter)) well you know they’ve got the money to ain’t they?
- Upper working class.
- Health conscious
- A person who really spends a lot of time looking after their self, and probably some of them haven’t got kids to be looking after.
- Very righteous.
- Different nationalities
- Do you think from different religions, eat more than other religions, like fruit wise and vegetable wise?

There was some disagreement about the impact having children might have on the likelihood of people eating 5-a-day. Some felt that the pressure of having a ‘family’ might make it too difficult to get the recommended amount, however others thought a ‘family’ might be more likely to make people healthy and therefore increase their likelihood of eating 5-a-day.

Barriers to fruit and vegetable consumption

As highlighted previously, some participants felt that they should be eating more fruit and vegetables; however, intention alone was not necessarily sufficient for action. The focus groups explored what participants viewed as barriers to consuming more fruit and vegetables.
The bullets below summarise some of the key findings from this section, however, it must be remembered that these factors do not operate in silo and many are interrelated.

- Fruit and vegetables can go to waste;
- There is poor local access to fruit and vegetables;
- It takes too much time to prepare fruit and vegetables;
- The competition is more attractive;
- Changing family dynamics;
- Lack of skills and education in fruit and vegetable preparation;
- The impact of smoking making you feel generally ‘unhealthy’;
- Lack of freshness in fruit and vegetables;
- The price of fruit and vegetables is expensive;
- What some people perceive as ‘healthy’ (such as weight) is not always seen to be dependent on fruit and vegetable consumption;
- Consumption is not habitual;
- Children are influenced by their parents’ behaviour.

**Fruit and vegetables can go to waste**

Participants gave a number of examples of fruit and vegetables being wasted because they were not eaten in time and therefore ended up rotting away.

- *He’ll eat a bite of banana and throw the rest in the bin, so that’s where I really, most the time, I would buy it, but it don’t, most of it ends up in the bin*
- *I tend to throw my salad stuff away.*

There was a large financial impact reported of food being wasted. As highlighted previously, many of the participants stuck to a strict financial budget with a keen eye for prices and bargains, therefore food being wasted was seen as a large financial misuse. This is especially significant for some of the participants who noted that they struggled with finances – such as single parents in the groups. This perceived waste of money could cause participants to decide not to buy the fruit and vegetables.
• I just find though being a single parent, that, you know, it just goes to waste ... so I don’t really buy it, otherwise it would be a waste of money.

• I think (3.4) I think for people that have got money they see waste, but when people who like haven’t got the money, you’re counting the penny for everything aren’t you, I mean, you’ve got to, you’ve got to justify the waste, if you’re chucking stuff away you haven’t got the money to replace it.

• Well, XXX will say to me, Mum, I want plenty of fruit. And I’ll go to the supermarket and I’ll buy melon, kiwi fruit, chop it all up, and then I put it in, and then half of it I end up throwing away… Which is such a waste, isn’t it, because it’s not cheap.