

U.K. Retailers Rethink Checkout

Checkout—which every shopper must pass through—is a prime location where manufacturers market food and beverages. As consumers wait in line, strategically-placed products prompt them to make impulse purchases. Food and beverages at checkout undermine consumers’ best intentions and the public’s health. In the United States, the vast majority of supermarket checkout items, such as candy, chips, and sugar sweetened beverages, are unhealthy.¹

Checkout lanes in the United Kingdom (U.K.) provide a model for retailers. In the last decade, retailers in the U.K. have replaced candy, soda, and other unhealthy foods with better options. Today, as a result of consumer advocacy, nine U.K. supermarkets, totaling 90% of the country’s food retail market, have made healthy checkout pledges.²



Nuts and dried fruit are among the items sold at Marks & Spencer checkout

Public Health Advocates Successfully Launched a Movement to Rethink U.K. Checkout

Much of the U.K.’s success can be attributed to Sustain, the non-profit that spearheaded the Children’s Food Campaign (CFC). In the 1990s, early advocacy resulted in healthy checkout pledges from several smaller supermarkets.³ In 1994, Tesco, the U.K.’s largest retailer, phased sweets out of checkout aisles in their large stores.⁴

By 2011, the campaign ramped up. A letter from a frustrated mother prompted CFC to assess the prevalence of junk food in checkout aisles. Nearly all food retailers that CFC assessed had checkout aisles with unhealthy food and beverages.⁵ CFC found that a growing number of non-food stores were also stocking candy at checkout.⁴

Following the study, CFC launched a public campaign, pressuring retailers to eliminate candy at checkout. CFC empowered consumers to contact their local supermarkets and successfully tied unhealthy checkout to the larger conversation on child obesity happening in the media and Parliament.⁶

Soon after the campaign's launch, grocery chain, Lidl, approached CFC to conduct a pilot study of a single candy-free checkout aisle in one of its U.K. stores. The company monitored the pilot's popularity and found that the candy-free aisle received 20% greater foot traffic than other aisles.⁷ A customer survey also demonstrated strong support for candy-free aisles.

Encouraged by the results, Lidl removed candy from all its checkout aisles, making no exceptions for holidays. Lidl checkout now offers products such as fresh and dried fruit, nuts, and seeds. A nutritional analysis of new checkout aisle products found that they contain fewer calories and less sugar, saturated fat, and sodium than previous offerings.⁸

A few months after Lidl's decision, Tesco announced it would extend healthy checkout to all stores, including their nearly 2,000 smaller Express and Metro outlets.⁸

Ninety Percent of U.K. Grocers Now Have Healthier Checkout Policies

To date, nine U.K. retailers have adopted healthy checkout policies:

- **Aldi** – In 2015, Aldi introduced Healthier Checklanes, an initiative which replaced checkout aisle candy with single-serve nuts, dried fruits, and granola bars. Aldi has since rolled out the program to all 1,500 U.K. stores.^{9,10}
- **Asda** – In 2012, Asda pledged to restrict candy to a third of their checkout aisles and offer an array of fruit and non-food items.¹¹
- **Co-operative** – In 2013, the Co-operative (Co-op) pledged to ban displays of high fat, sugar, and salt products from checkout.¹¹ In 2017, they removed candy with “marketing and packaging aimed at children” and instead offer options such as fresh fruit and fruit bars at checkout.¹²
- **Lidl** – In 2014, Lidl limited the sale of candy from checkout aisles at all 600 of its U.K. stores, replacing it with fresh and dried fruit, oatcakes, and juice.¹³
- **Marks & Spencer** – In 2012, Marks & Spencer (M&S) phased candy that may appeal to children out of belted checkout aisles. In 2015, the retailer also pledged not to stock “confectionary, crisps, cakes, and biscuits” in checkout aisles in all 580 of its stores.¹⁴



Aldi has Healthier Checklanes in its 1,500 U.K. stores

- **Morrisons** – In 2015, Morrisons announced it would remove candy from all manned checkouts within the year. Morrisons replaced sweets with healthier alternatives like fruit, nuts, and bottled water.¹⁵
- **Sainsbury's** – Since 2004, Sainsbury has not sold candy at manned checkout aisles in its supermarkets. Sainsbury's pledge does not extend to their smaller convenience stores.¹¹
- **Tesco** – Tesco has not stocked candy in larger supermarket checkout aisles since 1994. In 2015, they extended the pledge to their smaller Tesco Metro and Express convenience stores.⁸
- **Waitrose** – In 2014, Waitrose pledged not to sell candy at supermarket checkout.^{16,17}

Retailers' Checkout Pledges Support Healthier Eating

Researchers from the University of Cambridge analyzed purchasing data for common unhealthy checkout foods from 2013-2017 in the nine U.K. supermarket chains. They found that consumers purchased 17% fewer sweets, chocolate, and potato chips to consume at home immediately after the retailer announced a healthy checkout policy.² One year later, the decline in unhealthy purchases remained steady at 16%.²



Tesco does not stock candy at its registers

The research team also evaluated shoppers who purchased sweets, chocolates, and potato chips to eat on-the-go. From 2016 to 2017, supermarkets with healthy checkout policies experienced a 76% greater decline in these types of purchases compared to those without.²

Another study by the same Cambridge team reviewed checkout food policies in 69 supermarkets in the east of England. The researchers found that, compared to other supermarkets, those with “clear and consistent policies” display fewer foods at checkout, and less of the food they do display is unhealthy.²

Industry Policies Have Paved the Way for a National Policy

Implementation of voluntary healthy checkout policies in major U.K. supermarkets demonstrates advocacy's ability to improve public health. Supermarkets are increasingly implementing healthier checkout aisles in the U.K., and consumers have responded positively to the changes. While voluntary corporate policies are a step in the right direction, a common standard would yield greater public health benefits. Additional steps are needed to eliminate unhealthy food and beverage prompts from all checkouts.

Last year, the U.K. Parliament proposed a national healthy checkout policy, recognizing that mandatory requirements are not a far jump from voluntary corporate policies. Requirements, unlike corporate policies, have the benefit of ensuring that all retail stores improve all checkout offerings. The national checkout policy is part of the U.K. government's child obesity plan, which aims to halve childhood obesity by 2030.¹⁸ The proposed plan would prevent retailers from placing unhealthy food and drink at checkout, endcaps, and store entrances, as well as introduce a variety of food advertising and restaurant labeling measures.¹⁸

Healthier checkout aisles in U.K. supermarkets demonstrate the feasibility of healthier checkout for retailers and provide a model U.S. grocery chains should follow.

For more information, contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

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³ Almy J, Wootan MG. *Temptation at Checkout: The Food Industry's Sneaky Strategy for Selling More*. Washington, DC: Center for Science in the Public Interest; 2015. <https://cspinet.org/sites/default/files/attachment/report.pdf>.

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⁵ Haigh C, Durham S. *Checkouts Checked Out: How Supermarkets and High Street Stores Promote Junk Food to Children and Their Parents*. London, UK: Sustain, 2012. https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/checkouts_checked/.

⁶ Children's Food Campaign. Press for Change at the Till: Get the Junk off the Checkouts! London, UK: Sustain, 2013. https://www.sustainweb.org/childrensfoodcampaign/chuck_junk/.

⁷ Lidl Grocery Store. *Children's Diets Challenged by Supermarket Checkout Chocolates*. Lidl Grocery Store; 2014. http://www.lidl.co.uk/cps/rde/SID-D3C46D2F-8007A714/www_lidl_uk/hs.xsl/5028.htm.

⁸ Lidl Grocery Store. *Lidl Healthy Checkouts—Q & A Document*. London, UK: Bell Pottinger, 2014.

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¹¹ Which? *A Taste for Change? Food Companies Assessed for Action to Enable Healthier Choices*. London, UK: Which?; 2012.

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¹³ Rankin J. Lidl bans sweets at the checkout. *The Guardian*. January 13, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/jan/13/lidl-bans-sweets-at-checkout>.

¹⁴ Marks & Spencer. *Public Health*. Marks & Spencer; 2019. <https://corporate.marksandspencer.com/sustainability/food-and-household/public-health>.

¹⁵ Morrisons to Remove Sweets from Checkouts [press release]. Bradford, UK: Morrisons Corporate, September 18, 2015. <https://www.morrisons-corporate.com/media-centre/corporate-news/morrisons-to-remove-sweets-from-checkouts/>.

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