

Sweet tooth: What pocket money is buying today

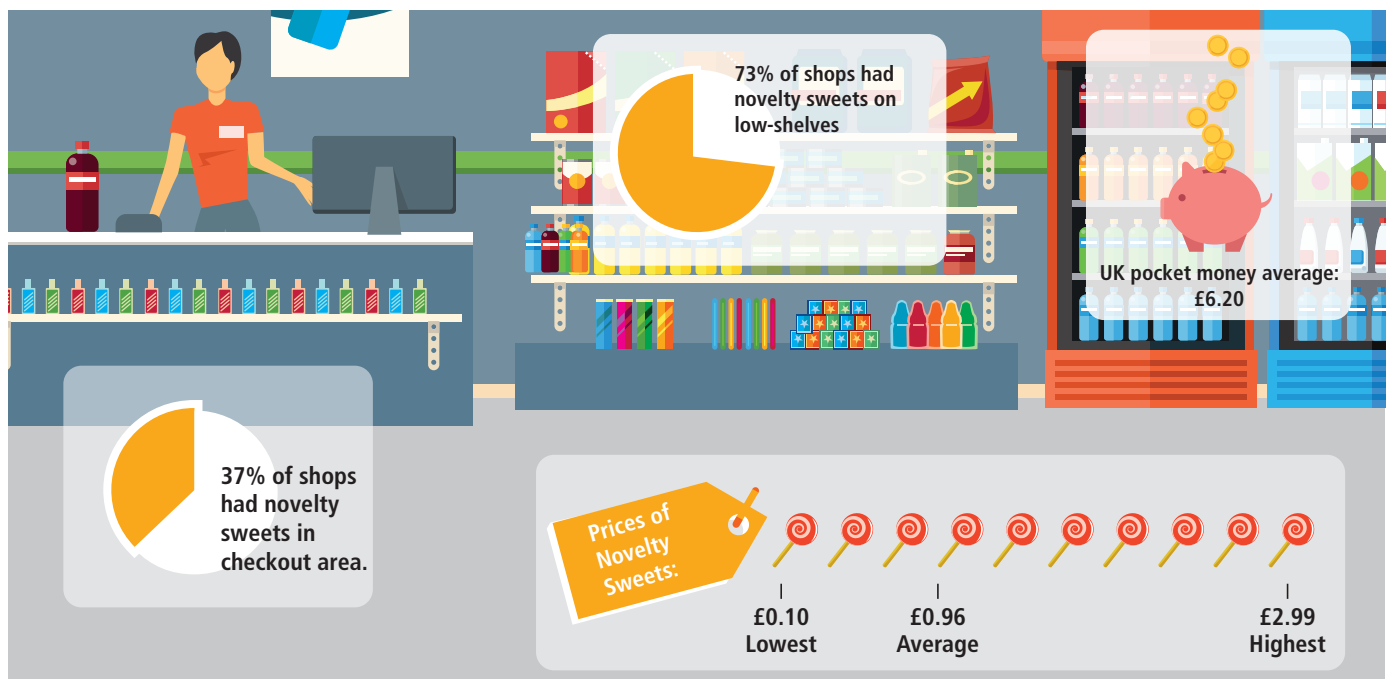
The availability of novelty sweets within high school localities
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It is estimated that 5% of the total energy of 11–18-year-olds comes from sugar confectionery. This is a worrying statistic considering the strong relationship between the consumption of free sugars and dental caries, and is potentially partly due to the availability of novelty sweets within close range of schools. Sweets

such as Brain Blaster Blitz, Toxic Waste and Brain Licker have become commonplace on supermarket shelves and their relatively low prices make them easily attainable for children.

In their recent *BDJ* article Ayman Aljawad and colleagues look at which novelty sweets were most widely available within a ten minute

walking range of high schools in Cardiff, as well as analysing where and how they were displayed in shops. The authors visited the shops in the area and recorded which sweets were available. Their results demonstrate that novelty sweets were generally on low shelves, suggesting targeted marketing by the ▶▶



Author Q&A

with Ayman Aljawad
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Why did you undertake this research?

Many studies and surveys have shown that eating food with a high 'free' sugar content is one of the major aetiological factors in the development of dental erosion and obesity amongst children.

The term 'free' sugars refers to all mono and disaccharides added to foods by the manufacturer, cook or consumer, plus sugars naturally present in honey, fruit juices and syrups.

Novelty sweets are of particular concern because they contain high levels of both free sugar and organic acids. Furthermore, their unusual product design facilitates regular frequency of consumption as many are available in re-sealable packages. The marketing of novelty sweets is mainly directed towards children who are the top consumers of sweet confectionary in the UK.

It is important to address sweet consumption as a part of an overall prevention programme to control the public health implications of such types of food.

To date, studies on the dental public health implications of novelty sweets are limited. Aspects that have not been investigated before include: the types of novelty sweets available to children in the UK, their prices, and where and how they are displayed in shops. All these factors may influence children's consumption

of novelty sweets. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore these gaps in the knowledge.

Did any of the results surprise you?

The findings of this study were very surprising as they showed that novelty sweets were widely available, particularly in shops around schools, which may reflect their popularity with school children and the low awareness of shop owners about their potential effects on children's dental and general health.

What is next in your plans?

This article is the first part of series of studies investigating the potential erosive effect of these sweets on teeth, the sweets' free sugar content, children's preference for them and sensory taste thresholds for sweet and sour in children. ■

◀ retailer, and were available in 73% of shops in the high school range. The ten most popular types of these sweets were priced from 39p to £1 – within budget considering the average weekly pocket money for children in the UK is £6.20. The results also show that novelty sweets were more likely to be found in shops in the most deprived areas. This may be because they are a palatable low cost source of energy.

The authors suggest that a tax on foods high in free sugars, much like the ‘fizzy drink tax,’ could help reduce consumption. Alternatively, consumer education programmes could also help to reduce the consumption of novelty sweets. They note that novelty sweets are an expanding market and that dentists should be aware of the current trends in confectionery.

By Jonathan Coe



Listen to Stephen Hancocks’ summary of this research via the BDJ Youtube Channel <http://bit.ly/BDJYouTube>

Expert view

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Half a century ago, there was a small drugstore around the corner of my primary school. It was the only shop near the school that sold sweets. The available types of candy were placed in a small showcase behind glass, meaning that you had to point out your choice with your finger. The limited financial resources of my parents allowed for just a few visits per year, usually around birthdays.

The study of Aljawad and coworkers highlights the dramatic increase in the availability of sweets for school children during the last decades. They visited 68 shops in Cardiff, and identified the availability of novelty sweets.

These sweets contain high levels of free sugars and/or acids with subsequent risk of caries and/or dental erosion. Nineteen shops, often within walking distance of schools, sold 38 different types of novelty sweets. The school in the most deprived area was surrounded by the highest number of shops selling novelty sweets. The sweets were usually displayed at low shelves, which means that they are accessible to all age groups.

The successful lobby for a sugar tax on sugar sweetened beverages earlier this year has led the authors to the suggestion that this tax might be expanded to other foods high in sugar, such as novelty sweets. However, it seems doubtful whether an increased price will have significant effects on the consumption of novelty sweets. As the price of the most widely available novelty sweets currently did not exceed £1, the average pocket money of UK children will still allow for several purchases a week. Therefore, much wider health education on novelty sweets seems urgently needed. ■



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