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Festive Hot Drinks Loaded with Sugar & Calories Reveals Lack of Progress in Achieving Sugar Reduction Targets

- Many high street coffee chains are failing to reduce the sugar in their festive milk and milk-alternative hot drinks **despite** the government's sugar reduction programme – with some hot drinks **INCREASING** in sugar since 2016
- **NEW** shock survey reveals many festive hot beverages contain huge amounts of sugar – one has 23 teaspoons, as much sugar as **four** white chocolate and strawberry muffins!
- Consumers looking for an alternative to cow's milk are unknowingly consuming excessive sugar due to lack of labelling and the 'health halo' of vegan options
- Worst **hot chocolate** 'offender' is *Starbucks Signature Caramel Hot Chocolate with whipped cream, using Oat Milk (Venti)* with over 23 teaspoons of sugar and 758 calories!
- Worst sugary **seasonal latte** is *Starbucks Gingerbread Latte with Oat Milk (Venti)* with over 14 teaspoons of sugar and 523 calories per portion
- As industry fails on its commitment to reformulate, **Action on Sugar** calls for the next government to **extend its soft drinks industry levy** to sugary milk and milk-alternative based drinks and for the food industry to immediately use **milks and syrups with no added sugar**

Many high street coffee chains are failing to make progress towards Public Health England's voluntary sugar reduction targets with their festive milk and milk alternative hot beverages – most of which would be eligible for the Soft Drinks Industry Levy¹ – according to a **NEW** nationwide survey by Action on Sugar, based at Queen Mary University of London.

The survey, which analysed both the sugar and calorie content of the largest available sizes of hot chocolates and seasonal lattes made with milk and milk alternatives (i.e. oat, almond, coconut, soya, rice-coconut) by popular high street chains, revealed certain seasonal beverages contain almost as much sugar as three cans of Coca Cola.² Furthermore, all of the largest available size products surveyed would receive a red traffic light for total sugars (>13.5g/portion) – the exception being **Costa's Gingerbread Lattes (Medio)** (made either with milk, soya or almond milk), and Pret's Soya Pumpkin Spice Latte which would receive amber³.

According to the survey findings, the worst **hot chocolate** 'offender' is **Starbucks Signature Caramel Hot Chocolate with whipped cream, using Oat Milk (Venti)**. This extra-sweet beverage has a staggering 23 teaspoons (93.7g) of sugar in one drink, and a whopping 758 calories – the same as eating four white chocolate and strawberry muffins!⁴

On the menu at **Caffe Nero** is their **Salted Caramel Hot Chocolate (Grande)** made with skimmed milk which contains nearly 15 teaspoons of sugar (59.6g) and 503 calories. An average person would have to do 90 minutes on the cross trainer to work this energy off.⁵

In comparison, **Leon Hot Chocolate (regular)** has just over four teaspoons of sugar (17g) and 257 calories, clearly demonstrating that lower sugar drinks can be made and enjoyed.

Sugar content of **hot chocolates** (highest available from each outlet)

Outlet	Product Name	Size	Milk Used	Calories per portion (kcal)	Sugar per portion (g)
Starbucks	Signature Caramel Hot Chocolate	Venti	Oat	758	93.7
Caffe Nero	Salted Caramel Hot Chocolate with Whipped Cream	Grande	Skimmed	503	59.6
EAT	Honeycomb Hot Chocolate	Regular	Semi-skimmed	449	47.0
Costa	White Hot Chocolate (take away)	Massimo	Semi-skimmed	417	43.3
Pret	Hot Chocolate	Regular	Rice-coconut	288	40.4
KFC	Cadbury's Hot Chocolate	Regular	not stated	180	29.3
Leon	Hot Chocolate	Regular	Whole	257	17.0

When it comes to sugary **seasonal lattes**, Starbucks again ranks the highest with its **Gingerbread Latte with Oat Milk** which is bursting with over 14 teaspoons of sugar (56.6g) and 523 calories per portion – the equivalent of eating 17 custard cream biscuits.⁶ If the same hot beverage was served with their *almond milk* instead of their *oat milk*, this would reduce the sugar content by 4.5 teaspoons of sugar (18g).

Sugar content of **seasonal lattes** (highest available from each outlet)

Outlet	Product Name	Size	Milk Used	Calories per portion (kcal)	Sugar per portion (g)
Starbucks	Gingerbread Latte	Venti	Oat	523	56.6
Costa	Hazelnut Praline & Cream Latte (take away)	Medio	Semi-skimmed	388	32.5
Pret	Rice-coconut Crème Brulee Latte	330g	Rice-coconut	216	31.5
McDonald's	Millionaire Latte	Large	Semi-skimmed	248	29
Caffe Nero	Salted Caramel Latte	Grande	Skimmed	160	28.6
EAT	Gingerbread latte	Regular	Semi-skimmed	206	23

Even without the added sugar from syrups, the sugar content of milk alternatives varies greatly. Unsweetened milk alternatives are naturally similar or lower in sugars than cow's milk⁷ and therefore using sugar-sweetened milks AND sugary syrups is completely unnecessary. For example, **Starbucks's Oat Milk Venti Latte** has over seven teaspoons of sugar (29.5g) and 350 calories per serve compared to **Starbucks Almond latte** in the same size which has under three teaspoons of sugar (11g) and 121 calories per serve.

Sugar content in **classic lattes** from Starbucks made with milk and milk substitutes

Outlet	Product Name	Size	Milk Used	Calories per portion	Sugar per portion (g)
Starbucks	Latte	Venti	Oat	350	29.5
Starbucks	Latte	Venti	Skimmed	168	22
Starbucks	Latte	Venti	Whole	298	21.1
Starbucks	Latte	Venti	Semi-skimmed	235	21.1
Starbucks	Latte	Venti	Coconut	214	14.1
Starbucks	Latte	Venti	Soya	195	13.6
Starbucks	Latte	Venti	Almond	121	11

Lack of Progress

Astonishingly, despite being blasted for their high sugar content in Action on Sugar's hot beverage survey in 2016⁸, more than one in four (27%) directly comparable products had seen no decrease in sugar but have in fact increased. In 2016, a regular **Vanilla Latte** in **KFC** had 19g sugar per serve but now has 26g sugar per serve. In contrast, a **KFC regular Mocha** has come down in sugar considerably from 45.1g per serve to 21g per serve, showing no consistency in its reformulation process.

Whilst it's clear that some businesses such as Costa, who has decreased sugar in some products by over 50% since 2016, are making noticeable progress as part of the voluntary measures – others are seriously lagging behind and are acting completely irresponsibly.

Top three increases and top three decreases in sugar since 2016

Café	Drink	2016 Sugars per portion (g)	2019 Sugar per portion (g)
Decrease in sugar since 2016			
KFC	Mocha	45.1	21.0
Costa Coffee	Chai Latte Massimo	79.7	39.0
Costa Coffee	Mocha Massimo	51.7	25.7
Increase in sugar since 2016			
Caffe Nero	White Chocolate Mocha	24.5	30.1
Greggs	Hot Chocolate	33.0	42.0
KFC	Vanilla Latte	19.0	26.0

HM Treasury was due to review the continuation of milk-based drinks exempt from the soft drinks industry levy (SDIL) in 2020 but election manifestos from Labour and Liberal Democrats have each pledged to extend the successful Soft Drinks Industry Levy to include sugary milk-based drinks^{9,10}, which was also proposed in Chapter 2 of the Childhood Obesity Plan¹¹ and the Green Paper *Advancing our health: prevention in the 2020s*¹². Action on Sugar is now urging the next government **to ensure that the mandatory soft drinks industry levy will be extended to both sugary milk and milk-alternative based drinks** in order to create a much-needed level-playing field.

Registered Nutritionist, Holly Gabriel at Action on Sugar, says: *“It is shocking that so many high street coffee chains are wilfully putting their customers’ health at risk despite PHE setting sugar reduction targets for sugary milk drinks in 2018. Responsible coffee shops have shown reformulation is possible within this category. For example, Costa have made some significant reductions in sugar since 2016 and some now offer smaller sizes as standard for seasonal drinks.*

“Coffee shops and cafes need to take much greater steps to reduce the levels of sugar and portion sizes, promote lower sugar alternatives and stop pushing indulgent extras at the till.”

Katharine Jenner, Campaign Director at Action on Sugar, based at Queen Mary University of London, says: *“You can always add sugar in, but you can’t take it out. Customers looking for dairy alternatives could be shocked to learn that many coffee shops and cafes use pre-sweetened alternative milks as the nutrition information is often very difficult to find – with information only available on websites or not at all. Only Pret A Manger had information available on screens in store.*

“The hospitality industry has a key role to play in being transparent to help reduce the amount of sugar we consume, which is one of the biggest causes of obesity, Type 2 Diabetes and tooth decay. Companies must improve the flow of healthy options bought by always displaying clear nutrition information at the point of sale.”

Graham MacGregor, Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine at Queen Mary University of London and Chairman of Action on Sugar, explains: *"It's vital that whichever government is in power next week fully commits to the target to halve childhood obesity by 2030, and to the current agreed Childhood Obesity Plan Chapter 2¹ This will mean giving full control to PHE to deliver a robust prevention programme and the authority to ensure that a largely irresponsible food industry fully complies – and that must include taxing these sugary milk-based drinks in the same way as soft drinks".*

Dr Saul Konviser of the Dental Wellness Trust charity says: *"The findings are deeply concerning especially given that many children also consume these festive sugary drinks which are not only bad for their overall health but also their dental health. Every day, at least 100 children are in UK hospitals having rotten teeth pulled out because of decay caused by sugary food and drinks that is entirely preventable. It is high time coffee shops and cafes act more responsibly and that means reducing the sugar and portion sizes across their drinks menu and stop putting profits before the health of our nation which is feeding the UK's obesity, Type 2 diabetes and tooth decay crisis."*

Ends

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Join the conversation @actiononsugar

Notes to editors:

Action on Sugar is a group of specialists concerned with sugar and its effects on health. It is successfully working to reach a consensus with the food industry and Government over the harmful effects of a high sugar diet, and bring about a reduction in the amount of sugar in food and drink products.

- A total of **124 hot chocolates** and **79 seasonal lattes** were surveyed across UK high street coffee chains: Caffe Nero, Starbucks, Costa, KFC, Greggs, McDonalds, EAT, Leon and Pret.
- For this survey, 'Seasonal Latte' refers to any drink offered as a seasonal special and includes the term 'latte' in the product name at the time of data collection.
- Nutrition information was accessed online via company websites between 11th - 22nd November 2019.
- From the published nutrition information the largest possible size for each drink was chosen (larger sizes may be still offered in store). NB the actual volume is not stated in store or online and so Action on Sugar were not able to make direct/like for like comparisons.
- Some sugar will be naturally occurring in cow's milk. PHE set an allowance value of 3.8g lactose per 100ml for hot drinks made with cow's milk purchased out of home.¹³
- An allowance of 2g sugar per 100ml is made by PHE for milk substitute drinks. It is worth noting however that sugar present in milk substitutes is classified as 'free sugars'^{14 15}
- 70 products surveyed were directly comparable to Action on Survey hot drinks survey in 2016

¹ Government guidance: Check if your drink is liable for the Soft Drinks Industry Levy

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/check-if-your-drink-is-liable-for-the-soft-drinks-industry-levy>

² A 330ml can of Coca Cola contains 35g/330ml and 10.6g/100ml of sugar. <https://www.coca-cola.co.uk/drinks/coca-cola/coca-cola>

³ Colour coding based on new front of pack colour-coded nutrition labelling criteria (Sugars - Red >13.5g/portion or >11.25g/100ml, Amber >2.5≤11.25/100ml, Green ≤2.25g/100ml)

⁴ Tesco white chocolate and strawberry muffins contains 23.1g sugar per muffin:

<https://www.tesco.com/groceries/en-GB/products/304376182>

⁵ Bupa calorie calculator: <https://www.bupa.co.uk/health-information/tools-calculators/calories-calculator>

⁶ A custard cream biscuit from Tesco contains 3.4 sugar per biscuit <https://www.tesco.com/groceries/en-GB/products/254921258>

⁷ Oatly Oat milk: <https://www.oatly.com/int/products/oat-drink-whole>

⁸ <http://www.actiononsugar.org/surveys/2016/hot-flavoured-drinks/#d.en.751351>

⁹ Labour manifesto: <https://labour.org.uk/manifesto/rebuild-our-public-services/>

¹⁰ Liberal Democrats manifesto: <https://www.libdems.org.uk/plan>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childhood-obesity-a-plan-for-action-chapter-2>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/advancing-our-health-prevention-in-the-2020s/advancing-our-health-prevention-in-the-2020s-consultation-document>

¹³ PHE juice and milk-based drinks guidance:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/708930/Sugar_reduction_juice_and_milk_based_drinks.pdf

¹⁴ PHE juice and milk-based drinks guidance:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/708930/Sugar_reduction_juice_and_milk_based_drinks.pdf

¹⁵ Definition of free sugars: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29587886>