

## THE CONVERSATION

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# How to stop your lunch break damaging your health

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Eating out is bad for us. Studies have shown that food provided outside the home contains more calories and more fat, especially saturated fat. The trouble is, many of us are eating this food every day without really realising what's in it.

In recent years great efforts have been taken to help us understand the composition of packaged food. The clear marking of allergens, ingredients lists and “traffic light” indicators on the front of packs show retail customers how much fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt are contained. However, there is an important gap in this admirable trend.

Those of us who eat our lunch in a workplace canteen find it a lot more difficult to access the kind of information that leads to informed choices. And canteens can play a critical role in terms of healthy eating. They are a captive, sometimes subsidised, setting that is often used to provide the main meal of the day. In effect, many of us are eating out five times a week without really acknowledging it.

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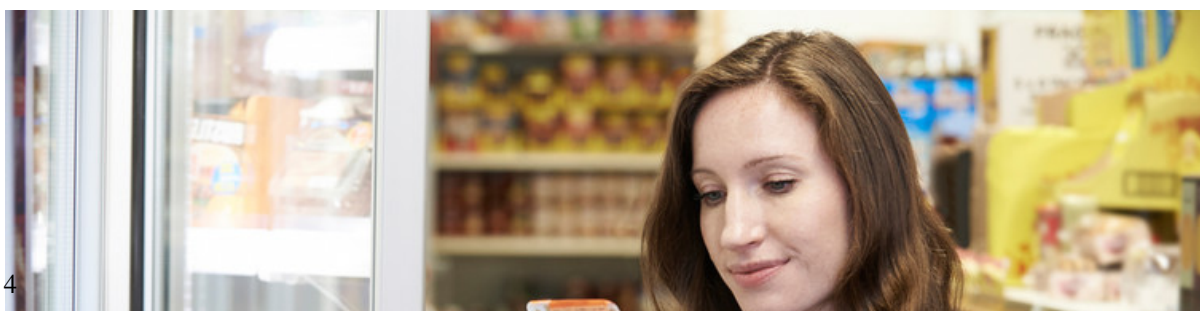
Do you go for the healthy option? Prostock-studio/Shutterstock

## Right to know

So how many of us are using these canteens? Well, three quarters of workers in the UK stay at work over lunchtime, with 31% eating at a workplace canteen. That's more than 7m of us. While nutritional and allergen labelling is now widespread in our supermarkets, workplace canteens rarely provide such information in an easily accessible format. Influencing dietary behaviour here could be instrumental in reducing employees' risk of developing chronic diet related diseases such as type 2 diabetes or obesity. It should give companies and organisations healthier, happier and more productive employees.

The personal and economic benefits are clear. Health, simply put, can contribute to an organisation's value. And we have got used to knowing: there is growing consumer interest in information on food eaten out of the home. This includes the nutritional content of dishes, the origin of ingredients and the presence of possible allergens. It could easily be argued that it is a fundamental right to know what we are eating.

New EU regulation requires the clear labelling of the presence of 14 allergens for pre-packaged food and food served. The 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, in the US goes further, requiring nutritional information to be posted in restaurants and large fast food chains. There are similar requirements in Ireland. However, more can be done in workplace canteens to ensure that diners are able to make informed choices. Where dish information is available, it is often not provided in a consumer-friendly way. Possibly as a consequence of this, studies have found that the increased presence of data is not always having a strong influence on consumer choice.





Reviewing the options. SpeedKingz/Shutterstock

## On the menu

So how can we change this? Currently, most information on food offered at work is printed out on a menu card or information board. If you've ever eaten in a canteen you will know how cursory the glances are from busy staff to these sources. And if you do take the time to look, the information is normally limited to a description of the dishes with little nutritional or other enhanced information available.

It means that each diner has to work hard to find the information that is relevant to them. After all, the ideal nutritional intake of a manual worker will be quite different than for staff who just push pens or hammer keyboards for a living. What is healthy for one diner might not be so ideal for the next. The need for a personalised approach to providing information is clear, and the solution might lie in our pockets.

Technology, most notably apps on our mobile phones, have been shown to have good potential for providing detailed but clear individualised information. People will happily interact with a well-designed bit of software where they wouldn't hunt down the printed menu.

That is why a pan-European partnership between industry and academia has developed the FoodSMART project. This project is developing a smart phone app, which uses detailed dish data uploaded by the caterer to provide you with personalised information. You can tailor the information to your particular dietary requirements and preferences and it should allow the lunchtime crowd to assess their food intake precisely and efficiently. It can also make individual recommendations to help diners improve their health and well-being. All you have to do is scan a QR code with your phone to access the menu and all of this enhanced dish information.

Any initiative encouraging us to eat more "attentively" can help to reduce calorie intake. Enhanced information also allows those with food intolerances and specific dietary needs the freedom to eat away from home with ease. The millions of us who eat at a workplace canteen have been left in the dark while other initiatives help to shape our lifestyle choices. So whether you download an app, hunt down the menu cards or interrogate the canteen staff, it is probably time we did something about a

five-day-a-week habit that could be damaging our health.

 **Diet** **Obesity** **Work** **UK** **Lifestyle** **Health** **Fat** **morbidity and mortality**