



## Is “home cooked” healthier and cheaper than ready meals?

G. Naruseviciute, S. Whybrow, J. I. Macdiarmid and G. McNeill

Public Health Nutrition Research Group, Rowett Institute of Nutrition and Health, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB25 2ZD

Media reports suggest that cooking meals at home is cheaper than buying ready meals. Furthermore, it is popularly believed that home cooked meals are healthier than ready meals, although not if made following television chefs’ recipes<sup>(1)</sup>. This study compared the nutritional properties and cost of the ten most frequently purchased ready meals in a sample of Scottish households to equivalent meals cooked from ingredients following recipes from popular sources.

The numbers of ready meals purchased by Scottish households ( $n = 2865$ ) were collated from 12-months of continuous household consumer panel data collected by the UK Kantar Worldpanel (KWP) in 2012. KWP comprises a nationally representative sample of household members who scan and record all food and drink purchases brought into their homes. The ten most frequently purchased being: pizza, chicken curry, lasagne, macaroni cheese, cottage/shepherd’s pie, Chinese chicken dishes, fish pie, spaghetti bolognese, pasta and chicken bake and jacket potatoes. Recipes for equivalent dishes, matched by the name of the dish, and the main ingredients, were taken from the internet (allrecipes.co.uk and bbc.co.uk/food) and popular recipe books (Save with Jamie and The Hairy Dieters: How to love food, lose weight and keep it off for good). Nutritional information for the ready meals ( $n = 1547$ ) was taken from product labels by KWP. Recipes for home cooked meals ( $n = 27$ ) were analysed using NetWisp dietary analysis software.

There were no significant differences between the ready meals and recipes for energy, macronutrients fibre or sodium, when

	Energy (kJ)	CHO (g)	Fat (g)	Protein (g)	Sugars (g)	SFA (g)	Fibre (g)	Sodium (mg)	Cost (pence)
Recipes (per 100g).	593	13.6	5.8	9.3	2.8	2.9	1.5	0.179	0.397
Ready meals (per 100g)*	585	15.8	5.1	7.1	2.6	2.3	1.7	0.228	0.452
<i>p</i> value	0.931	0.530	0.536	0.092	0.752	0.449	0.517	0.152	0.280

\* Source: Authors’ calculations using Kantar Worldpanel data on food purchases brought into the home.

expressed per 100 g. Howard *et al.* reported lower sodium densities in meals prepared from recipes than ready meals<sup>(1)</sup>. Whereas, in this study there was no difference between the two in the amount of sodium per 100 g. The amount of salt added during cooking could vary greatly from the recipe, however, depending on seasoning preference.

Buying ready meals was no more expensive (per 100 g) than buying the ingredients for making equivalent meals from recipes. The costs of reheating, or cooking, the dishes were not included, however, and these could be up to six times higher for the recipes than the ready meals depending on the type of cooking appliance used<sup>(2)</sup>. This should be taken into account when comparing the overall cost.

These results suggest that the popular belief that it is healthier and cheaper to cook at home rather than buying ready-made meals is over-simplified. Making healthier meal choices may be more important for improving diet quality than whether meals are bought ready-made or prepared in the home.

1. Fender A, Simons D, Swain V & Tucker G. (2009) Understanding the greenhouse gas impacts of food preparation and consumption in the home. Campden BRI.
2. Howard S. (2012) Nutritional content of supermarket ready meals and recipes by television chefs in the United Kingdom: cross sectional study. BMJ.