# The sugar tax and sweets

From the sweeties.net wiki

When people talk about the sugar tax in Britain, they mean a tax on fizzy drinks. Sweets and chocolate were never part of it. That does not mean sweets escape tax altogether, and it has not stopped a long argument about whether the sugar in food should be taxed too.

## The drinks levy

The sugar tax, officially the Soft Drinks Industry Levy, was announced in the 2016 Budget and came into force on 6 April 2018. It is paid by the companies that make or import soft drinks, not directly by shoppers. Drinks with more than 5g of total sugar per 100 millilitres are taxed at 18p a litre, and drinks with more than 8g at 24p a litre. Pure fruit juices, milk based drinks and the smallest producers were left out.

It was expected to raise about £1 billion a year for sport in schools, but it was also meant to change recipes, and makers cut the sugar in many drinks to get under the thresholds. A 2025 study found that most of the fall in calories from drinks came from these recipe changes. Barr's changed the recipe of Irn Bru in 2018, to the dismay of many fans, and cans and bottles of the old recipe later sold for hundreds of pounds online. The levy raised £336 million in 2019 to 2020. A 2024 study led by the University of Cambridge found that in the 11 months after it began, daily sugar from drinks fell on average by 3.0g for children and 5.2g for adults. In November 2025 the government announced it would widen the levy to pre packaged milkshakes, coffees and protein drinks and lower the threshold to 4.5g per 100 millilitres.

## So why not sweets?

Sweets, chocolate and biscuits were dealt with differently. In 2016 the government's Childhood Obesity Plan launched a voluntary sugar reduction programme, challenging the food industry to cut the sugar in the foods that contribute most to children's sugar intake by 20 per cent by 2020. Chocolate confectionery and sweet confectionery were both included.

It did not go well. By 2020 the overall reduction across the foods covered was 3.5 per cent. Breakfast cereals cut their sugar by 14.9 per cent and yogurts by 13.5 per cent, but chocolate confectionery managed just 0.9 per cent. The campaign group Action on Sugar concluded that a voluntary programme is not an effective way to get widespread and consistent reductions in sugar.

## The tax that never came

In July 2021 the National Food Strategy, an independent review for the government led by Henry Dimbleby, recommended a tax of £3 a kilo on sugar and £6 a kilo on salt sold for use in processed food and in restaurants and catering, replacing the drinks levy. It estimated the sugar part alone would raise £2.3 billion to £2.8 billion a year, and hoped it would push manufacturers to change their recipes. The Food and Drink

Federation opposed it, arguing it would not drive reformulation and would make food more expensive for struggling families.

When the government published its own food strategy in June 2022, the tax was not in it. Dimbleby said the government's plan "isn't a strategy so much as a list of policies", and health campaigners accused ministers of being too close to the food industry.

## The tax sweets already pay

There is, though, one tax that treats sweets differently from most other food: VAT. Most food in the UK is zero rated. But HMRC counts chocolates, sweets, pastilles, gums, lollipops, candy floss, sherbet, chewing gum, bubble gum, Turkish delight, marshmallows and similar confectionery as standard rated, so they carry VAT at the full rate. Biscuits wholly or partly covered in chocolate are standard rated too.

Cakes, on the other hand, are zero rated. HMRC's list of zero rated items includes Jaffa Cakes, even though biscuits covered in chocolate are standard rated. Marshmallow teacakes are zero rated as cakes as well, even though a bag of marshmallows is standard rated.

## Other countries do tax sweets

Some countries have gone further. Hungary brought in a tax in 2011 on foods high in sugar and salt, including confectionery. Norway has taxed sugar products since 1922, originally to raise money, and in 2018 raised the tax on sugary ready to eat products by 83 per cent. Finland taxed sweets from 2011, and later ice cream, but dropped the tax in 2017 after the European Commission found it amounted to unfair state aid. Mexico added a 5 per cent tax on junk food in 2013.

For the government rules that took sweets away from supermarket checkouts, see why sweets were moved away from the checkout.