

# Is five a day enough?

While we Brits struggle to meet our fruit and vegetable quota, in Japan they aim for an astonishing 17 portions daily. But who is right? And what counts anyway? **Luke Waterson** reports

It is a fact universally acknowledged by health advisers the world over: consuming more fruit and vegetables is a Good Thing. After all, they are the only foods to feature in the nutritional guidelines of all major countries, and everyone agrees that eating more of them may help to reduce the risk of heart disease and some cancers. But that is where the consensus ends. Although in Britain we are told to live by the five-a-day maxim, the Danes must aim for six, the French 10, and Canadians are urged to get through between five and 10. The Japanese government, however, now recommends up to 13 portions of vegetables plus four of fruit daily.

So why are British guidelines so low? How did the government settle on five a day anyway? Are all fruits and vegetables equally good in the eyes of top nutritional gurus? And do baked beans really count? The answers to these questions and more, below.

## Why are British guidelines so low?

First, the Department of Health does not want to scare us

with big numbers. "There must be a balance between what is healthy for the British public and what is feasible," says a spokeswoman. In other words, expecting us suddenly to match the Japanese in fruit and vegetable consumption would be like asking a novice piano player to headline the Proms after a couple of lessons: totally off-putting. But five (and not, say, 10) a day was chosen because, as well as being sufficiently unthreatening, it followed the World Health Organisation guidelines on diet, nutrition and chronic diseases. The nutrients provided by 400g of fruit and vegetables (five x 80g portions) were considered a simple remedy to combat problems ranging from obesity to diabetes.

Second, consumption of fruit and vegetables in Britain has historically been poor. Ever since the industrial revolution, when country dwellers left their bucolic idylls for metropolitan factories, food has been expected to last longer and has been prepared away from the consumers. Food slowly became more processed and

into the British diet came refined flour, sugar and saturated fat. Third, interesting fruit and vegetables do not grow in abundance here. In Greece, where local produce is used more in traditional dishes, 54% of vegetable intake is from composite foods, compared with Britain's 14%.

## Is five a day really enough?

Not according to Jacqui Lowdon, a dietician with the British Dietetic Association. "In terms of the reported health benefits, it's enough. But it's also probably less than ideal. Many studies recommend seven for women and nine for men (because of their increased calorie requirements). The reason they [the Department of Health] chose five was that they thought there was no way anyone was going to achieve seven to nine portions a day."

Remember, too, that the five-a-day campaign slogan has two little-noticed words in front of it: "at least". Five may be the number that is marketed, yet this figure only

represents the minimum recommended number of daily portions.

## What constitutes a portion?

British recommended portions are 80g, based on a European average of portion sizes. The Japanese, who have seven to 13 vegetables and two to four fruit to aim for daily, do admittedly eat smaller portions – as little as 50g "counts". The maths, though, even if these nations got by on minimum recommendations, still leaves Britain's daily quota looking scant. In fact, when a Brit eats a "portion" of vegetables, it is about a third of a portion served up in Spain.

## Are fruit and vegetables equal?

Charts on the official five-a-day website ([www.5aday.nhs.uk](http://www.5aday.nhs.uk)) are set out clearly enough – one medium apple, two spears of broccoli, three sticks of celery, half a grapefruit, a two-inch piece of cucumber, eight cauliflower florets, two satsumas, four heaped tablespoons of kale, and so on. But as all have their own individual benefits (broccoli is much richer in nutrients than cucumber, for example), why are fruit and vegetables lumped together as one numerical daily target, and not addressed separately? Again, it seems that it is all about giving people maximum leeway. "It's important to raise fruit and vegetable consumption in whatever way possible," says Brigid

McKevith, a senior nutritionist at the Nutrition Foundation.

But some nutritionists are more prescriptive, stressing the importance not only for vegetables in the five-a-day diet, but for leafy greens, essential in fighting heart disease, to account for two-thirds of those consumed. Countries such as Greece already insist on this.

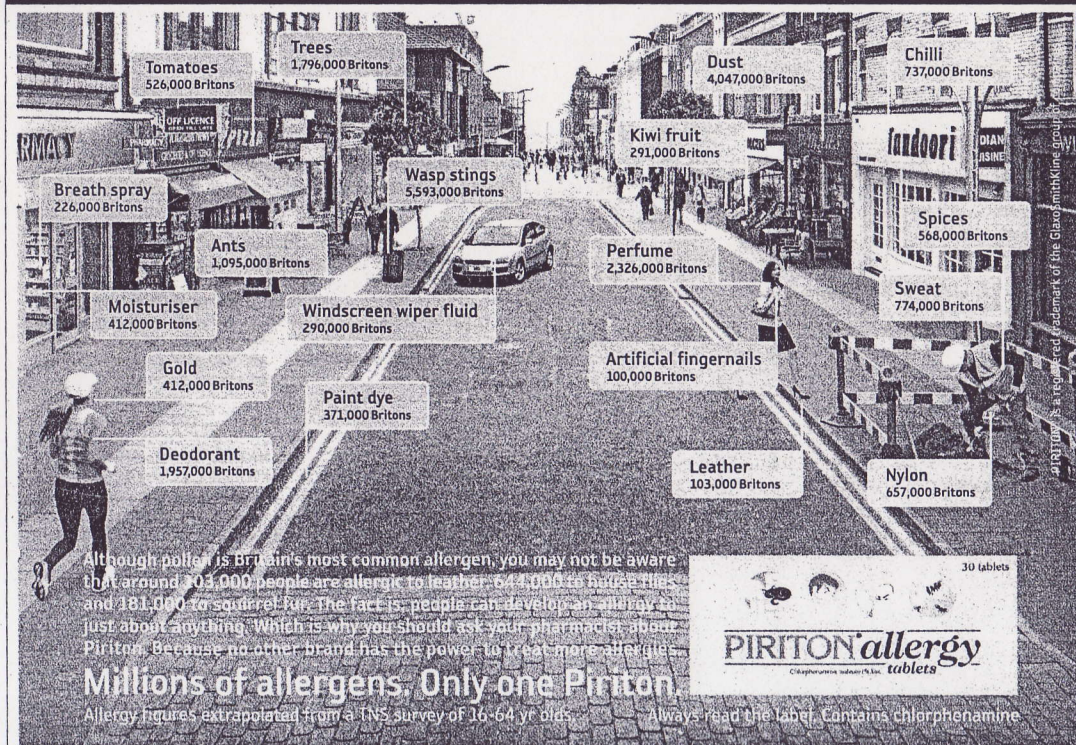
"It's not just about reaching five a day – it's about reaching five different portions a day," says Lowdon, who recommends three portions of fruit and two of vegetables. Her other top tips: "Certainly try to go for the fruits that include skin on them (washed) and eat veg raw when you can, so as not to boil away vitamins." McKevith's dream five would be "asparagus, banana, apple, blueberries and some orange juice."

## Do baked beans count?

Yes. "They count as a portion because they contain dietary fibre," says Lowdon. "But beans and pulses would only count as one of your five a day regardless of how much of them you eat, and remember that baked beans, like many tinned products, are high in salt." NB: spaghetti hoops don't count: they come under carbohydrates, as do potatoes. And don't think you can substitute a vitamin pill or other dietary supplement either: fruit and vegetables contain additional beneficial substances, such as fibre.

## JAPAN

17 a day of any vegetable  
4 a day of any fruit



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