



UK Sugars Intake: Trends in Adults

2008 – 2023

Sugars in the Diet

Sugars are a group of simple carbohydrates that serve as a source of energy and deliver many functions in foods and drinks. Sucrose (table sugar) is refined from sugar cane and sugar beet plants, but sugars aren't only found in these plants.

Sugars are produced naturally in all plants, including fruits and vegetables, and are naturally present in dairy products. Sugars may be added to food and drinks during processing and preparation to enhance flavour, improve texture, and extend shelf life (1,2).

Free sugars: sugars added to food or drinks, and sugars found naturally in honey, syrups, and unsweetened fruit and vegetable juices, smoothies and purées. For full definition see (3).

Added sugars: refer to sugars and syrups that are added to foods and drinks during processing and preparation.

Total sugars: consists of all sugars found in foods and drinks – whether they are added, free or naturally occurring.

Authoritative bodies such as the World Health Organization recommend reducing consumption of free sugars based on observed links between excess calories intake and an increased risk of health issues including overweight and obesity, and also on the link between more frequent free sugars intake and an increased risk of dental caries (1).

Measuring Free Sugars Intake in the UK

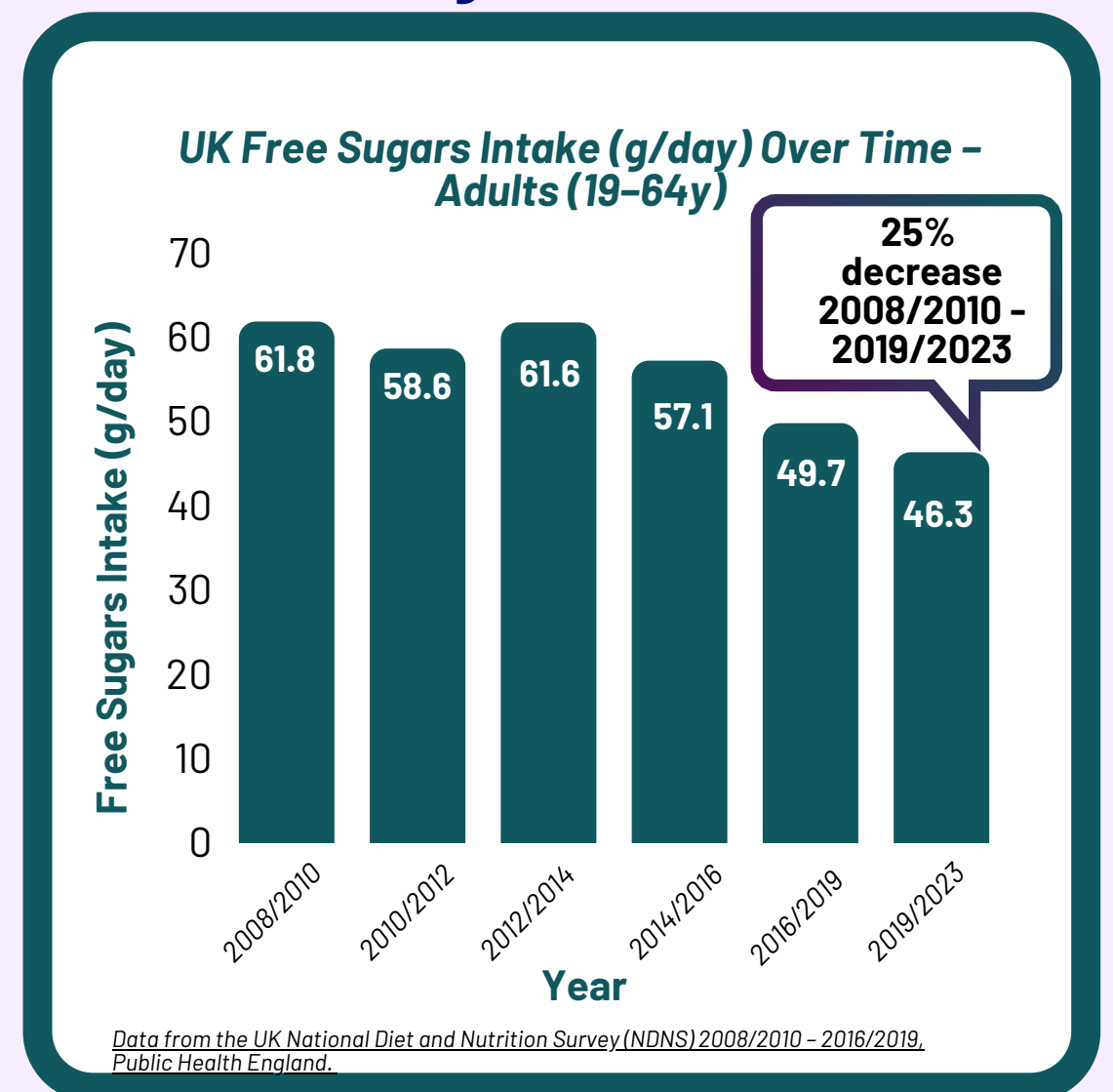
The National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) is an ongoing, cross-sectional survey designed to collect quantitative data on the food consumption, nutrient intake and nutritional status of the general population living in the UK (4).

The latest NDNS data (2020–2023) covered a 4-yr time period, including Covid-19. Data collection methods were updated from the end of 2019 onwards, transitioning from paper-based dietary intake reporting to online reporting via an app.

Free Sugars Intake Trends

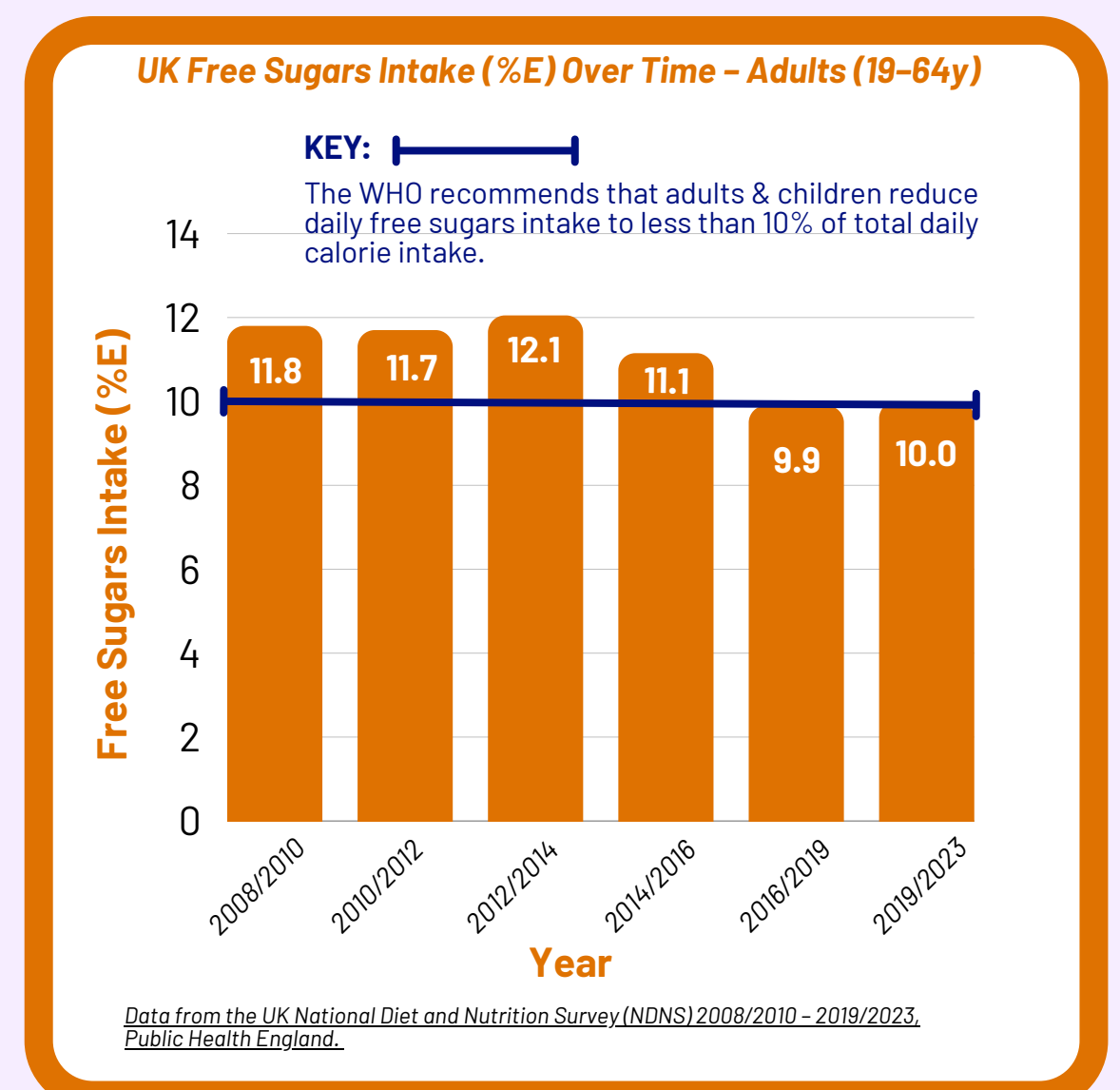
The graphs below display data from NDNS on free sugars intake, measured in grams per day and as a percentage of total energy intake, in UK adults.

UK Free Sugars Intake Trends



Free sugars intake between 2008/2010 and 2016/2023 decreased by 25.1% (15.5g/day) in UK adults aged 19–64 years old (4).

UK Free Sugars Intake as a Percentage of Total Energy



Free sugars intake as a percentage of total energy intake decreased by 15.3% (1.8%E) among UK adults aged 19–64 between 2008/2010 and 2019/2023 (4).

Obesity Prevalence in England: Trends in Adults

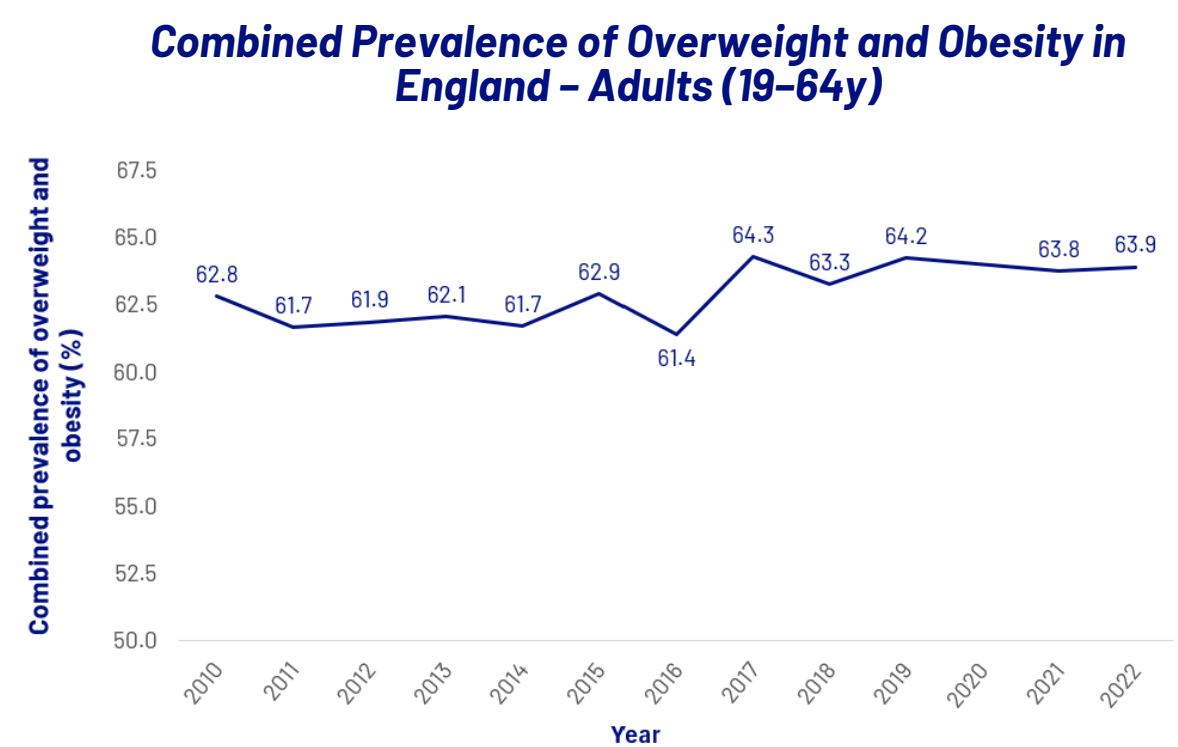
Obesity

Obesity is a build-up of excessive body fat, that can lead to an increased risk of developing diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes mellitus, and some cancers.

Body mass index (BMI) is a measure of whether someone is a healthy weight for their height. In adults, a BMI of 25 kg/m² is considered overweight, while a BMI of 30 kg/m² is classified as obese.

The development of obesity is complex, and no factor is solely responsible. It is the consequence of a wide variety of factors including those related to individual biology, social interactions, eating, physical activity and the environment we live in (5).

The graph to the right shows data from the Health Survey for England, the primary source for monitoring overweight and obesity in the UK population (6).



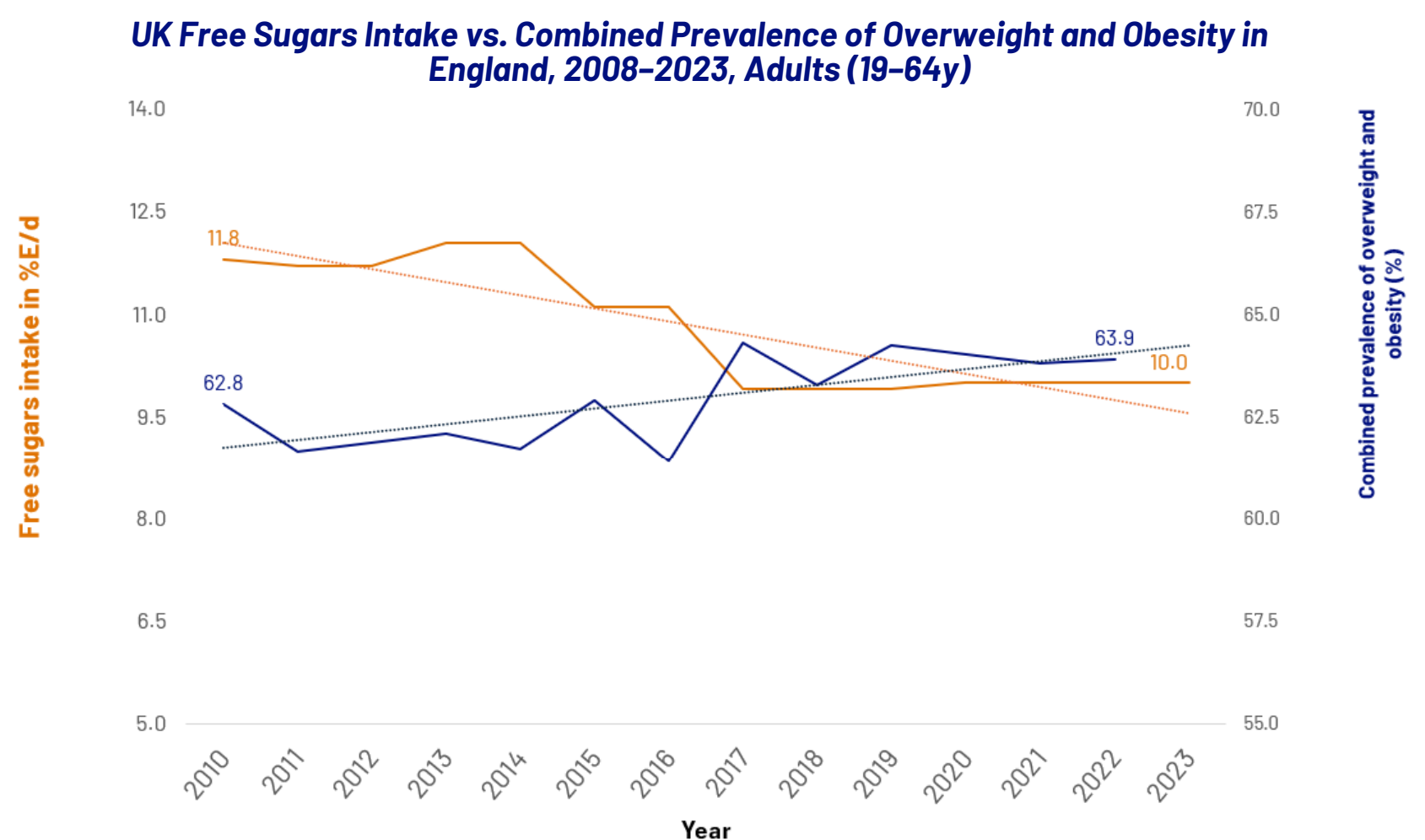
*Data on height and weight was not collected in 2020.

The combined prevalence of overweight and obesity increased from 2010 to 2022 by 1.1% in adults in England.

Sugars Intake & Obesity Prevalence

The graph below illustrates trends in free sugars intake as a percentage of total energy intake, along with trends in obesity (including overweight) in adults in England/UK.

Over time, free sugars intakes have decreased, whilst overweight and obesity prevalence continues to increase. Although these are correlation data, it suggests that the development of obesity is complex, with no single factor being solely responsible. These data indicate that policies focusing on reducing sugars intake alone, to prevent obesity, may not be effective. Organisations such as the British Nutrition Foundation state that it's important to note that energy balance and body weight are affected by many different factors at an individual and societal level (1). A whole systems approach recognises this complexity and involves addressing factors in a holistic manner.



References:

1. British Nutrition Foundation. Sugar and nutrition. 2023. <https://www.nutrition.org.uk/nutritional-information/sugar/> (See "For Professionals" tab)
2. World Sugar Research Organisation. Sugars definitions. <https://wsro.org/sugars-diet/sugars-definitions3>
3. Swan et al. A definition of free sugars for the UK. Public Health Nutrition. 21(9), 1636–1638 doi:10.1017/S136898001800085X
4. Public Health England. National Diet and Nutrition Surveys. 2008/2010 – 2019/2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-diet-and-nutrition-survey>
5. World Health Organization. Obesity and overweight. 2024. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight>
6. NHS England. Health Survey for England. Overweight and obesity in adults. 2022. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/2021/overweight-and-obesity-in-adults>