

All wrapped up

Excessive food packaging misleads shoppers and is bad for the environment - but it's proving difficult to stamp out



Finding your way to these 35 mini biscuits is like a game of pass the parcel

Just 200g of Fox's mini bite-sized apple and raspberry treats seem to require a handbag-sized plastic bag, with five smaller, individual bags inside to hold them. The reason? Fox's told us it's opted for 'easily transportable snack-size bags that can be enjoyed at work or during the commute. For customer convenience, these are packaged as a week's supply in a larger bag'.

But packaging isn't just about convenience or keeping food safe in transit. As Sainsbury's admits: 'Packaging helps promote and sell the product'. And the scramble to produce eye-catching designs that make an impact on the shelf means unnecessary layers of cardboard, paper and plastic. These not only spell disaster for the environment as they mount up in landfill, but they also deceive us as to how much food we're really getting for our money.

Until recently there's been little incentive for companies to cut packaging on food. And, although there are laws to stop over-packaging, trading standards officers have told us it's hard to prosecute as companies often have plausible-sounding reasons for those extra layers.

Future packaging

Some attempts to make packaging more environmentally friendly work better than others. Tesco introduced biodegradable packing for organic fruit in 2001, claiming it 'could save millions of pounds in waste disposal'. But it's now used on just a few Tesco products as 'customers weren't willing to pay for more costly packaging'. Some other companies are still using biodegradable packs. And they're not limited to fruit: in Australia,

Cadbury's Milk Tray chocolates are packed in plantic – a plastic made from corn starch that dissolves when wet and can be composted.

The Co-op is pursuing new ways to cut excess packaging – for example by removing the cartons from its tomato purée and selling it in stand-up tubes. Tesco is also working on using less cardboard – with a trial of thinner sleeves on its Finest ready meals. Tesco told us it's monitoring customers' reactions to the trial packs but that, even if they sell well, it won't

automatically extend the new thinner style to its standard ranges.

HI-TECH PACKS

New laws mean we're soon likely to see a new generation of food packaging. 'Active' packs interact with food to prolong shelf life, while 'intelligent' packs tell you about the food's condition. For example, Sainsbury's plans to sell pears packed with 'intelligent sensor labels'. These tell you when the pears are ripe by reacting to their aromas. Such innovations may seem to add to our packaging burden, but the hope is that they'll lead to less food waste – another drain on landfill space.

EXCESSIVE PACKAGING

A certain amount of packaging is necessary to prevent damage – few of us would want to buy loose eggs, for example. But some of the foods we found take protective packing to the extreme.

As well as the Fox's biscuits pictured, the same company's Chocolate Rocky bars are also very well wrapped. Beneath the outer layer are two sealed packs of eight bars, each of which is also individually wrapped. According to Fox's, 'sixteen bars loose inside a bag would damage the product'. Nestlé, however, found a way round this problem. It invested in a new packing machine for its 16-pack Kit Kats, eliminated the inner wraps, and now uses 100 tonnes less polypropylene a year – with no sign of damage to the Kit Kats.

It's not just people buying sweet treats who end up with a bin full of packaging after a shopping trip. Some fruit and vegetables are also heavily packaged. We asked Tesco and Sainsbury's why their standard mangoes are sold loose while the premium mangoes are individually wrapped in plastic shells. Both pointed out that the premium fruit are riper so need more protection. But some stores don't restrict this kind of packaging to delicate foods. Morrisons, for example, sells packs of four baking potatoes in a plastic tray with a Cellophane wrap. The supermarket told us this is because its



Tesco is trialling new packs with less cardboard for its Finest ready meals

packaged potatoes are bigger than those sold loose so are more likely to get damaged. Yet we found loose potatoes in our local Morrisons that were larger than those in packs (see picture below).

Deceptively large

Research funded by the Department of Trade and Industry shows that many of us ignore labels telling us how much is in a pack and judge by the look or feel instead. It concluded that 'suppliers capitalise on this behaviour [by using] oversized packaging' so we think we're getting more for our money. Companies also know that larger pack sizes encourage us to use more of a product, partly because we perceive big packs as less expensive.

But manufacturers insist that bigger packs are a necessity. Sugar producer Billington's told us that, although its 500g plastic packs are only two thirds full, it needs to use this size of bag. The sugar is unrefined so the granule size varies. Because of the speed of the packing machine, there has to be space for this extra volume, which later settles. This isn't a problem for parent company Silver Spoon, whose 500g refined sugar comes in smaller paper packs.

COMPANY POLICIES

Cutting down on packaging can involve initial costs for the company – investing in new machines or methods, for example. But even simple changes to packaging can mean savings for the manufacturer as well as the environment. Mark Barthel from the



There's no clear reason why some potatoes need to be packaged

Packaging compared

It's hard to say definitively what type of packaging is best for the environment, as many factors come into play. Recycling information appears on some packs, but it's often hard to decipher and not much help if you have no access to certain recycling facilities. In theory, most materials can be recycled, but some – such as plastic – are more expensive and difficult to recycle than others.

Helping the environment is about more than just recycling: consider buying less packaging or making use of reusable containers. Also, think about where packaging comes from and how it gets to you. Richard Hands, from carton makers Tetra Pak, points out: 'Our cartons are hard to recycle in the UK but they're made mainly from renewable wood. And just one truck transports enough material to make nearly a million cartons, while it takes 50 trucks to deliver a million bottles'.



Waste and Resources Action Programme (Wrap), which is working with companies to reduce packaging, recognises that there's a complex balancing act. 'Good packaging protects food, is attractive and easy to use. But it can be minimised without losing functionality, and it can be made easier to recycle.' Few companies currently have a coherent approach to packaging, as Mark explains: 'You can walk along one aisle in a supermarket and find good and bad examples of packaging right next

Both bags contain the same amount of sugar

“There's a lot of green-washing in the food industry” Supermarket insider

to each other.' According to Jeff Cooper from the Environment Agency: 'The marketing aspect of packaging is still the dominant one and the environment is given short shrift. Initiatives like Wrap's mean we're moving in the right direction, but we still have a long way to go.'

A spokesperson for one major supermarket, who did not want to be named, told us: 'There's a lot of green-washing going on in the industry'. He believes environmental initiatives are often seen as just another marketing opportunity.

Moves in the right direction

Large companies are required by law to pay for the cost of recycling a certain percentage of the packaging they handle – so it seems to make sense for them to use fewer materials. But, so far, the focus has been on industrial packaging rather than on the packs we see on the shelves. The main supermarkets, for example, told us they've reduced transport packaging or switched to reusable materials for transporting foods. But few food companies have done the same for packaging used on the food itself. New EU rules mean the UK government is now under pressure to reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill sites – or it could face huge fines. As a result, there's more pressure on companies to reduce packaging or reformulate it to make it easier to recycle.

To relieve the burden on landfill, shoppers also need to become more aware. Follow our tips, right, to start making a difference.

Make a difference

- Don't buy products you think are excessively or deceptively wrapped. Complain to your supermarket or the manufacturer and contact your local trading standards department.
- To find out what materials can be recycled in your area, ask your local council or look at www.recycle-more.co.uk or www.recyclenow.com. You can then take this into consideration when shopping.
- Take a close look at the weight of packets when you're shopping and don't assume that larger packs contain more.
- If you want to have your say, go to www.wrap.org.uk/retailpackaging and fill in the questionnaire about consumer attitudes to packaging.