Consumer Insights Tracker: Chapter 6 Food availability

Consumer concerns about food availability

Over a third of participants (36%) reported feeling worried about food availability in March 2023. This is significantly higher than when data collection began in April 2020 (31%) and the in March 2022 (29%) but not significantly different to the average over the previous 12 months (34%).

As shown in Figure 23, worry about food availability has generally increased from June 2021 (18%), and reached a peak of 41% in October 2022. However, the proportion of participants feeling worried declined significantly in November 2022, falling 8 percentage points to 33%. This measure has remained relatively high over the latest winter period (35% in December 2022 to 36% in March 2023).

Figure 23: Reported levels of worry about food availability over time (April 2020- March 2023)

Data source: COVID-19 Consumer tracker April 2020-October 2021, Consumer Insights Tracker November 2021-March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75. Fieldwork dates and sample sizes available in Annex 1, 2 and 3.

Consumer reports of unavailable items

Participants were asked if any of their preferred food products were unavailable whilst doing their usual food shopping in the last week (from a pre-defined list). The proportion of participants who reported that their preferred food products were unavailable has increased significantly since March 2022 (46%) and is now at its highest recorded level, with data from March 2023 showing that two thirds of participants (65%) had experienced at least one food item being unavailable in the last week (Figure 24).

Figure 24: Reports of any food items (from pre-defined list) being unavailable (November 2021 - March 2023)

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker November 2021-March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75. Fieldwork dates and sample sizes available in Annex 2.

The figure for March 2023 (65%) was significantly higher compared to February 2023 (58%). Over the previous 12 months the average was 55% of participants reporting that items were unavailable. This increase in March 2023 reflected the increase in the proportion of people reporting specific food items as being unavailable: fresh vegetables (36%); eggs (35%) and fresh fruit (24%).

In March 2023, the five most common items (Figure 25) that participants reported as 'unavailable' were:

- fresh vegetables (36%), 12-month average (20%)
- eggs (35%), 12-month average (21%)
- fresh fruit (24%), 12-month average (18%)
- fresh milk (16%), 12-month average (17%)
- bread (16%), 12-month average (18%)

Figure 25: Reports of the five most common items (from pre-defined list) being unavailable (March 2022- March 2023)

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker March 2022-March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75. Fieldwork dates and sample sizes available in Annex 2.

Prior to December 2022, frozen foods were one of the five most common items being unavailable during the 12 months from March 2022.

In December 2022 over a quarter (28%) of participants reported eggs as being ‘unavailable’, a significant increase compared to November 2022 (15%). This figure has risen steadily over the winter period, reaching a current peak of 35% in March 2023, with 60% of these participants also reporting that they were unable to find a suitable substitute for this item in March 2023. A combination of factors including rising costs for feed and energy, and avian flu have caused a disruption to the supply of eggs, with some supermarkets across the UK placing restrictions on purchases in November 2022.

From April 2022, the Consumer Insights Tracker included ‘cooking oils’ in the pre-defined list of preferred products that participants could select as unavailable. In May 2022 (21%) and June 2022 (25%) cooking oil was one of the five most common items reported as ‘unavailable’. This could be explained by the conflict in Ukraine which interrupted shipments of sunflower oil resulting in supermarkets introducing restrictions on purchases of cooking oil in April 2022.

Each month, participants who reported a food item as ‘unavailable’ were then asked if they found a suitable substitute for the item. In March 2023, a significantly higher proportion of people were unable to find a suitable substitute for eggs, fresh vegetables, fresh fruit and bread compared with March 2022.

- eggs (19% March 2022 vs. 60% March 2023)
- fresh vegetables (16% March 2022 vs. 35% March 2023)
- fresh fruit (15% March 2022 vs. 30% March 2023)
- bread (9% March 2022 vs. 16% March 2023)
- fresh milk (12% March 2022 vs. 16% March 2023)
- frozen foods (12% March 2022 vs. 17% March 2023)

The full datasets, including all food items included in the questionnaire, are available via the FSA data catalogue.

Consumer behaviours relating to food availability

Each month, participants are asked how often, if at all, they had done any of the following behaviours, to gain insight into actions related to over-purchasing or stockpiling:

- purchased raw ingredients to make products that they would usually buy pre-packaged
- changed what they usually purchase, for products with a longer shelf-life
- purchased more fresh food than they usually would, and frozen it for later
- purchased more non-perishable food than they usually would
- purchased more fuel than they usually would

Most of these behaviours showed a gradual increase from March 2022 until October 2022 where they peaked. In general, these have decreased and have been more stable from November 2022 until March 2023. However, in February there was a significant increase in the proportion of participants that reported ‘purchasing more non-perishable food than they usually would’ and ‘changing what they usually purchase for products with a longer shelf life’ compared to the previous month (Figure 26).

‘Purchasing more fuel than we usually would’ has followed a different trend from food purchasing behaviours as proportions have continued to decrease from June 2022 (16%) until March 2023 (8%).

Figure 26: Participants who reported over-purchasing or stockpiling behaviours (March 2022 – March 2023)

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker March 2022 - March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75. Fieldwork dates and sample sizes available in Annex 2.

Cutting or skipping meals for other reasons

The Consumer Insights Tracker tracks the proportion of participants cutting down the size of meals or skipping meals because they were unable to get a delivery of food or obtain food in other ways. (For other reasons for cutting or skipping meals see Chapter 4 and Chapter 5).

When tracking first began in April 2020, being unable to get a delivery of food or obtain food in other ways was the most common reason for skipping or cutting down the size of meals (32%). This was at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic when public health restrictions and voluntary social distancing measures restricted access to essential shops and consumers shifted to shopping online with some supermarkets struggling to meet the increase in demand for home delivery. This has declined significantly over time and remained steady between September 2020 to April 2022, although the proportion increased significantly in May 2022 (23%). Overall, over the last 12 months, the average figure was 21%, in line with the findings from March 2023 (22%) (Figure 27).

Figure 27: Participants who reported cutting down the size of meals or skipping meals 'at least once' or more in the month prior because they were unable to get a delivery of food or obtain it in other ways (April 2020 – March 2023)

Data source: COVID-19 Consumer tracker April 2020-October 2021, Consumer Insights Tracker November 2021-March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75. Fieldwork dates and sample sizes available in Annex 1 and 2.