

**GOOD FOOD  
NATION 2026**

# How the UK really eats



goodFOOD



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## How the UK really eats

# Executive summary

Now in its 13th year, the Good Food Nation survey once again examines **what's shaping our attitudes towards food**. Based on more than 2,000 respondents from across the UK, including students, workers, retirees and families, we're uncovering how the nation eats.

For 2026, we've chosen to focus on five key themes. First is meal inspiration. The role of technology is unquestionably significant as more people turn towards digital channels for their ideas.

Up next, we look at the definition of cooking. We examine what it means to be in the kitchen and how confident we are. It's heartening to see that the nation loves to cook, and we see a mixture of traditional routines with some experimentation thrown in.

We then discover what's holding us back. Accessibility is a huge driver for 2026 as we explore how neurodivergence and disability impact our food choices. This leads to the non-practical side of things, looking at how food makes us feel.

Cooking inherently makes us happy, but stress, costs and 'decision fatigue' are all prevalent themes within the emotional impacts of food. As a nation, we're inclined to see takeaways and convenience foods as a treat – but more and more of us are going for practicality, too.

Finally, we look at meal planning. Who's got it all planned out and who's winging it on the day? The report shows some interesting trends among older generations, particularly where issues like sustainability are concerned. But from organisation to stress-busting, we note the value of food planning tools for every household.

This takes us to our final conclusions on what brands can learn. We explore methods to overcome the overwhelm of decision fatigue, as well as targeting customers based on specific pain points and being clearer in our messaging. These findings are absolutely invaluable for brands who want to better serve their customers and positively impact the way the nation eats.



Read on to find out more from our headline stats including:

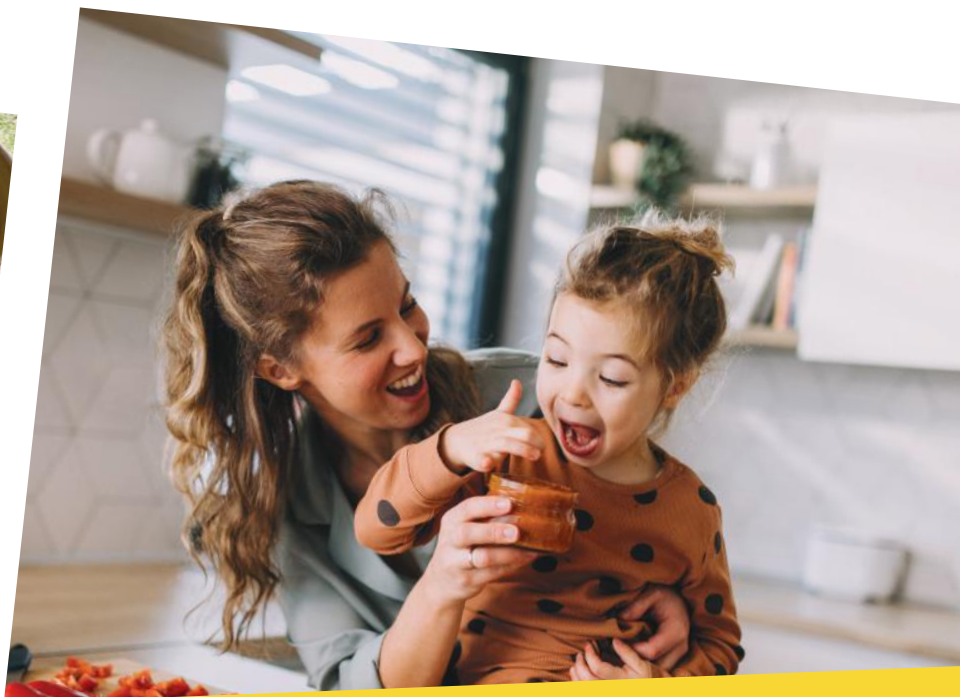
- \* **87% of us** enjoy cooking
- \* **One in four 18-24s** plan their meals a week in advance
- \* **22% of consumers** cannot identify ultra-processed foods
- \* **70% of us** would like more exciting main meals
- \* **80%** value speed when choosing recipes
- \* **76% of us** have experienced 'decision fatigue' when planning
- \* **Over-65s** are happiest in the kitchen
- \* **Cost is the biggest influence** on meal planning

We hope you enjoy reading this as much as we enjoyed putting it together. The Good Food Nation Survey exists to inform our team and improve our practices. It also helps brands, retailers and policymakers understand what's really going on in homes across the UK, empowering us all to address challenges and make healthier choices.

## Methodology

The results in this survey are from a YouGov poll of 2,080 adults aged 18+, carried out online between May 8 and May 11, 2026. Respondents are selected at random from a base sample of 2.5 million individuals, and weighted to be representative of the UK adult population. This profile is normally derived from census data or, if not available from the census, from industry-accepted data.

All results are based on a sample and are therefore subject to statistical errors normally associated with sample-based information.





## Meal inspiration

# Where do we get our recipe ideas, and how often will we try something new?

Things have changed significantly since the first Good Food Nation survey in 2014. With **TikTok, AI and influencers** all adding to the mix, we have more sources of inspiration than ever. That means it's up to brands to prevent the dreaded '**decision fatigue**' for meal planners. This is especially prevalent in **18-34s**, who use a particularly diverse range of channels. One simple app could solve it all – factoring in nutrition, cost and even visual appeal.

Beyond digital influences, we're also feeling overwhelmed by the wider range of choice in supermarkets. Conversely, those with limited budgets are feeling the pinch as low-cost ranges shrink, with **four out of six major supermarkets** reducing these options in 2026 alone. It follows that **one in five of us feels stressed** when shopping – so is it easier to stick to what we know?

Traditional methods like tried-and-tested meals or family recipes fared best, in the high 30s. **But our findings showed that we're also using:**



37%

Internet searches



33%

Recipe websites



20%

Social media platforms



11%

Recipe apps



5%

AI platforms



4%

Meal delivery services

When broken down by age group, we see crucial differences, too. **One in 10 people aged 18-34 would use AI, 10 times the number of 65+.** Meanwhile, **36% of this age group would use social media**, compared to **the average of 20**. It's worth noting that caution should be advised when we think about social media inspiration, with one study showing that just **2.1% of nutrition content on TikTok is accurate**.

Luckily, verified information on websites like Good Food is tackling this misinformation. Loyalty to recipe websites is consistent across all ages, which bodes well for brand crossovers into mobile apps. These could prove essential for promoting nutritional accuracy and accounting for all budgets.

There's also a strong preference for social proof. **Most influenced by other user reviews** are those aged **18-24**, for whom **20% said they would be 'influenced a lot'**. **Personal recommendations are favoured by 73% of 18-34s**, compared to **only 57% of 55+**.

Age range	Most popular source for recipe inspiration
18-24	Internet search <b>38%</b>
25-34	Internet search <b>42%</b>
35-44	Internet search <b>43%</b>
45-54	Cookbooks <b>41%</b>
55-64	Cookbooks/what I have in <b>41%</b>
65-74	What I have in/previous recipes <b>52%</b>
75+	What I have in <b>43%</b>





## How willing is Britain to experiment with food?

Despite their regular set of favourite meals, those aged **55-64** are most likely to try something new. More than a quarter (26%) say variety would heavily influence their meal planning, while 35-44s were more cautious at 19%. Men and women fare almost equally, and Northern Ireland is most experimental at 29%.

**So how can we encourage the nation to try new recipes?** By tackling these common challenges head-on, such as:

### Time

One in four of us is deterred by prep/cooking time, rising to 51% in the 45-54s. When meal planning in general, 80% of people would be influenced by the time taken to prepare and cook, peaking at 88% with the 25-34s and dipping to 74% in retirees.

There's also a **clear link between time and decision fatigue**, so brands should share quick, accessible tips to save time on recipes – for example, using leftovers or substituting ingredients.

## Cost

It's interesting to see that the cost of living **affects both ABC1 and C2DE groups equally**, with both saying they would be deterred by expensive ingredients. Budget-based meal ideas or swaps, such as subbing prawns for chicken, would impact everyone but especially 18-34s, who are most concerned about cost at 49%.

Women, who are more likely to be responsible for food planning and cooking, are more worried about cost than men, coming in at 46% and 36% respectively. But it's a different story for couples, who have more financial security. **Two-thirds of married people are undeterred by cost** – suggesting a potential content opportunity for family-focused meal ideas.

## Availability of ingredients

**Britain's clearly willing to be experimental**, as 62% of us would be undeterred by unavailable ingredients. Hearteningly, it's not a money issue. Despite relative household incomes, ABC1 social groups are more deterred by a lack of ingredients at 41%, compared to 34% of C2DEs. This suggests those with **lower budgets are more willing to be creative**, and brands should lean into this.

Others who may benefit from said creativity are full-time students. More than four in 10 cannot access the ingredients they need, whilst regionally, the North East is most lacking at 46%. Just like subbing ingredients based on costs, brands can suggest alternatives based on region – for example, through localised listicles.

## "I don't enjoy cooking"

While **87% of us enjoy our time in the kitchen**, there's room for brands to intervene for those who don't. In particular, we see that those who make last-minute decisions are less likely to enjoy it – further reinforcing the benefits of meal planning.

A simple, accessible resource would help this minority grow to love cooking, addressing the likely stressors such as time and cost pressures. These are prevalent among parents with more than three children, so we should tailor family-friendly content to bring that 87% closer to 100%.



## A no to nutrition?

While a healthy diet can benefit everything from our mood to our eyesight, it's not getting the credit it deserves. In our 2025 survey, **one in four 18-24s said that healthy food was an inconvenience** due to time pressures with social lives, studies and work. This year, the trends are similar, with nutrition ranking below other factors. As brands, we should home in on the benefits, and reinforce why nutrition is just as important as things like cost.

The **good news is that 69% of us are influenced by nutrition** – but it's not ranked as highly as time, cost or simplicity, all of which tie at 80%. Conversely, 88% of us are influenced by the availability of ingredients. This shows a willingness to have more variety in our diets; we simply need the guidance to act on it.

Like costs, women are more health-conscious at 74% as opposed to 64% of men. The age group least concerned about nutrition is the over-75s at 36%, which aligns with widowed respondents ranking lowest. In terms of region, the 'unhealthiest' is Scotland, at 37%. **Brands should align nutrition with factors like simplicity to target these demographics** – for example, 5-a-day recipes.

## More flex, less complex

Above all, **Britain is more concerned about simple, stress-free cooking**. Long lists of ingredients are a big deterrent, whilst there's a keen appetite for substituting foods and flavours. When asked to give 'other' reasons for not experimenting, many cited flexibility with ingredients.

Picky eating isn't the only reason here. **Allergens are a valid worry** for many people, while conditions from digestive disorders to physical disabilities can also impact cooking choices. We're also visual creatures, with many stating that unappealing photos would be a turn-off!

**So, now we know what's inspiring us in the kitchen, how are we applying this in practice, and where can brands help?**



*"I wouldn't choose a recipe if it's not clearly written on the website how to substitute ingredients on the list."*





*What does cooking mean in 2026?*

## How does the nation define cooking and how do we rate ourselves as cooks?

Food trends in 2026 have been influenced by rising costs, creative choices and even moving away from using gas ovens. But how do we define 'cooking': is it starting from scratch or opting for the microwave?

More than **8 in 10 people (83%)** favour the traditional approach, including peeling, chopping, seasoning and heating. However, we're open to simpler methods and are forgiving of using leftovers or store-bought sauce. With more than half of us (53%) boiling pasta and combining it with pre-made sauce, or using things like curry kits (51%), our definition of cooking is broad.

Age, routines and confidence in the kitchen are all factors at play here. While assembling frozen ingredients and putting them in the oven is less favoured by 18-24s and 65-74s (26% and 18% respectively), it's more common between 25 to 54-year-olds. Nostalgia for simpler meals could also make a difference.

Other notable findings showcase contrasting attitudes across generations:

- \* **One in 5 people aged 75+** consider making a bowl of porridge with milk to be cooking, compared to 5% of 35-44s
- \* **Meals from pre-prepared recipe boxes are most popular with 25-34s** at 56%, correlating with 52% of full-time workers who may favour meal planning simplicity
- \* **3% of us think ordering a takeaway** counts as cooking, rising to 5% in time-poor 25-34s

# Set in our ways

Routines play a huge part in the way we cook. This is even more prominent when broken down by mealtimes. While six in 10 (61%) have the same breakfast every day, 38% have the same lunch – but only 19% stick to the same dinners. Echoing our findings from last year, in which only one-third of us planned breakfast and lunch, this suggests extra emphasis on the evening meal. Women are more likely to vary things ‘quite a bit’ than men, at 40% compared to 34%. The mental load is even higher for those with more than three children, at 41%.

People are far less experimental with breakfast, with just 4% claiming they like to switch things up. **Dinner is four times more likely to see variety (16%),** with older age groups more willing to experiment (22% for 65+). This is reflected in the way we shop, too – **93% have some kind of food shopping routine,** with the majority (38%) shopping two to three days a week.

Again, there are some notable outliers here:

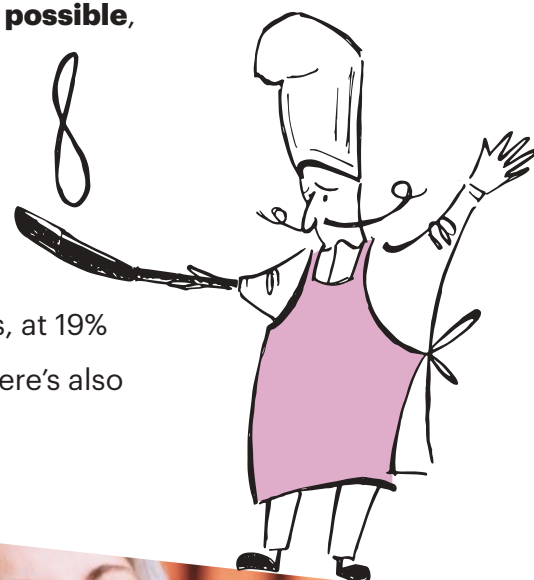
\* **10% of 65-75+ try to vary their breakfast and lunch as much as possible,** suggesting time is a huge factor for younger, working people

\* **Despite this, a ‘regular set of favourites’ was most popular for dinner** among the 55-64s, at 43% compared to the average 38%.

This suggests routines are still important, even for our most experimental meals

\* **Breakfast was the most popular meal to skip** at 15%, but not amongst those of working age. It was most often skipped by 55-64s, at 19%

While these generational gaps suggest a preference for routines, there’s also a third defining factor: confidence.





## Cooking up a storm

Practice makes perfect, and those with more years of cooking under their belts are more likely to rate themselves. Overall, the nation rates its cooking skills as 5.82 out of 10 – but this rises to 6.35 in the 65-74s, and drops to 5.52 for the under-35s. Those most confident in their skills (8-10/10) were also most likely to be wholly responsible for meal planning, at 24%.

Confidence affects our mood, too. **Seven in 10 of us feel better when we've made a meal from scratch.** This presents an opportunity for brands to push the mental health benefits, particularly the stress-reducing appeal of planning meals.

Women rate themselves more highly than men overall, at 6.14 compared to 5.48. This likely reflects their relative responsibilities for cooking, with **55% of women solely responsible for meal preparation compared to 38% of men.** And where are our best cooks located?



**1 London is most confident** in its cooking prowess, at **5.99/10**

**2**

**The Midlands and the South tie for second** at **5.89/10**

**3**

**Northern Ireland is least confident** in its cooking, at **5.25/10.**

This regional disparity also correlates with nutritional diversity across the UK.

## Is Britain eating healthily enough?

The 30-plants-a-week trend rose to prominence in 2023, supported by findings from The British and American Gut Project. By eating a more diverse range of plants, we can enrich our diet with fibre and enjoy a healthier microbiome.

So, is this the new five-a-day, and if so, who's heard of it? As a nation, a little over one-third (36%) – but London is most knowledgeable at 47%, compared to 31% in the North. Women were more likely than men to have heard of it, at 41% compared to 31%, while those aged 45-54 knew the least. Interestingly, the age group most likely to have heard of the trend was the 65-74s at 41%, suggesting they may have more time to read up on their food choices.

# The impact of UPFs

Plants aside, these findings also correlate with our attitudes towards ultra-processed foods (UPFs). London is the region most likely to avoid UPFs at 69%, compared to a UK average of 66%. The capital is also more likely to eat beans and pulses weekly at 60%, against a UK average of 52%, 49% in Scotland and 38% in Northern Ireland.

The survey also suggested a **need for brands to reinforce clarity around processed ingredients**. In 2025, 22% of people said they didn't know what a UPF was. In response, we asked a trickier question for 2026: "How confident are you in identifying one?" Some 27% said they were not confident.

*"If the ingredient listed on the packaging isn't typical or something I can get hold of easily, then I can assume it's processed."*

**A recurring trend among these findings is improper labelling.**

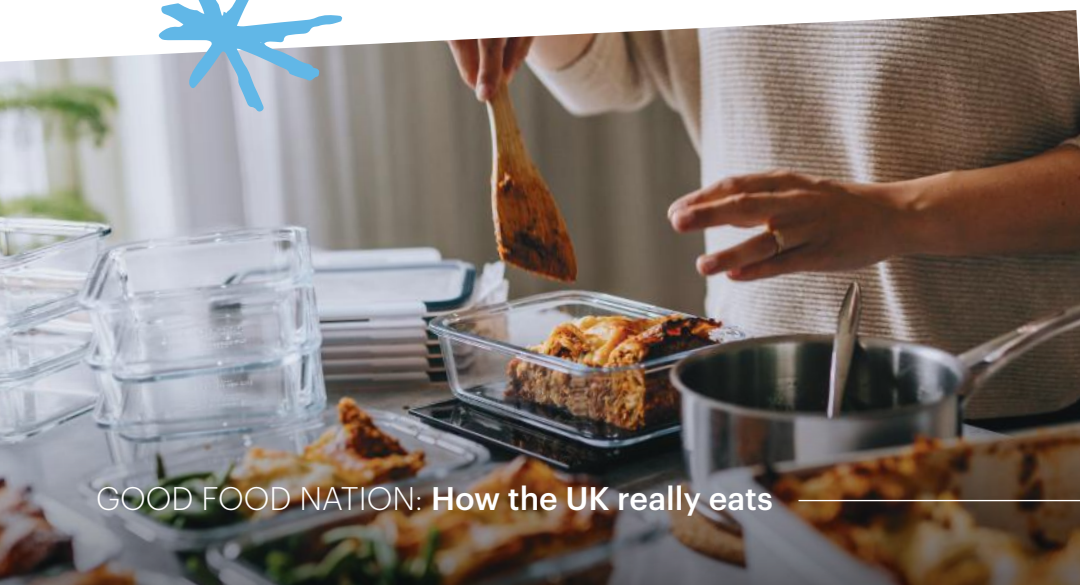
In 2025, 19% of consumers said they found food labels confusing. Today, we're relying on assumptions – looking at things like ingredients lists, shelf life or even heavy packaging to identify UPFs.



# How meal planning helps us to be healthier

Meal planning proves to be effective against eating UPFs, with 72% of meal planners more likely to avoid them, compared to the 61% of people who wing it. The **most organised planners are also likely to make healthier decisions** – an incredible 77% of those who plan meals more than a week in advance avoid UPFs.

However, other **emotional responses make us more likely to consume them**, such as 'decision fatigue', which we'll discuss in the next chapters.





## Barriers to cooking

# Is Britain burnt out? How modern lifestyles shape our cooking habits

As a nation, we're **enormously comforted by meal routines** – but modern life doesn't always work that way. More than one in 10 of us (14%) say we have 'unpredictable schedules', though this is not always about work. Those with the least consistent schedules are 18-24s (22%) or full-time students (23%).

On the other end of the scale, families with more than three children have the most uncertainty at 27%. Retirees are the most likely to have an organised diary, with just 6% citing inconsistent routines. Brands should address the most 'burnt out' demographics, looking at solutions like using up leftovers or freezer-safe ingredients to combat unpredictable schedules.

**Cancelled plans are a consistent barrier to meal planning**, but the reason this causes such anxiety is food waste. One in five of those aged 35-54 would not plan based on the risk of wasting food. It's great to see we're so concerned about sustainability, but with the average UK household losing £1,000 on wasted food per year, brands should also think about cost.

*"I work 12-hour shifts and don't want to cook when I come home at 8pm."*



# Adapting to the cost of living

In the UK, we're no strangers to economising. From shopping for late-night reductions to swapping out meat, we've become adept at making our pennies go further. An astonishing 81% of us have changed our food habits due to rising costs.

As ever, this is not even across the board. Households with two children are most likely to have changed their habits, at 89%. Meanwhile, women are far more price-conscious than men. While 84% of women are adapting their shopping lists, this drops to just 77% in men. So, how exactly are we tightening our belts?

\* **Shopping around:** 42% of us look for value, with the North East most deal-savvy at 59%

\* **Snacking less:** Almost one-third (30%) are eating or buying fewer snacks, a practice most common in 25-34s at 34%. Busy households with three or more children are cutting down on snacking the most, at 38%

\* **Batch cooking:** One-quarter of us cook in batches, dropping to 20% in men and rising to 29% in women. Part-time workers are most likely to batch cook at 31%.

Air fryers continue to go the distance. Some 24% of us use them to save energy, rising to 38% in retirees aged 65-74. But while we're willing to reduce our utility bills, this does not come at the cost of portion sizes. Just 15% of us would reduce portion sizes and 10% would eat less overall.



## Family affairs



Understandably, pressures from running busy households impact the way we eat. When asked what would motivate them to buy takeaways or ready meals, families referenced children with additional needs. 'Fussy kids' or simply treating our loved ones also came up, while decision fatigue affected one-third of two-child households.

**Families with more than three children were most impacted by the stress of cooking. Some 28% would opt for convenience foods to overcome this. Similarly, one in five households with children say they do not have time to plan meals.**

Catering for different palates is a common issue. Almost one in three (29%) say that other people in the household might not try new meals. This is pertinent in those living as married (41%) and those with older children aged 17+, at an incredible 52%.

**So how can we empower people to move away from takeaways and opt for more nutrient-dense meals? Tips for busy parents, such as sneaking more vegetables into a spag bol, are a great start.**



## An accessibility issue

While costs, time and decision fatigue are all barriers to cooking, one perhaps overlooked consideration is **accessibility**. As a nation, we're doing everything we can to reduce friction. This becomes even more challenging when we consider additional needs. For example, over-75s were the highest age group for valuing simplicity in meal planning at 46%. This ties with 25-34s, though it's likely the former have smaller appetites and reduced physical or mental capabilities, while the latter are more worried about balancing busy schedules.

We can also consider these setbacks when planning for nutritional value. When asked what would help them introduce more variety into their diet, respondents felt held back by conditions such as:

- \* Allergies
- \* Digestive problems
- \* Avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID)
- \* Adaptations to lifestyle following surgical weight loss

Similar patterns emerge when people are asked what would stop them from trying a new recipe. Physical disabilities prevent some from standing for too long, demonstrating the need for simpler, quicker meals. Food intolerances, particularly where ingredients cannot be substituted, are also a major deterrent.

**Neurodivergences such as autism and ADHD** were also mentioned. In particular, these were obstacles to making positive changes to our diets, while some preferred the security of keeping things the same.

This suggests we need more discourse about how our diet is impacted by mental health or neurological conditions. Resources like how to cook for children with special needs or ARFID, which can affect one in 20 of us, are leading this charge.

# Combatting overwhelm

Brands should empower their customers to feel confident in themselves and combat the overwhelm of planning and cooking. Stressful lifestyles and new meal inspiration are all contributing to the nation's collective 'decision fatigue'. More than **three-quarters of us (76%) have experienced this fatigue at some point**, wherein we feel overwhelmed by making lots of small decisions.

There's a big generational gap here – 65% of 18-34s compared to 33% of 55+. Wales, Yorkshire and the West Midlands are most likely to feel frazzled at 80%. While 68% of men have felt overwhelmed with food choices, this rises to 83% in women. Again, **full houses are most stressed**, particularly with children under four years old at 94%.

Social media may have a part to play here. Bearing in mind that we are influenced by how a recipe looks, some **85% of Pinterest users have experienced decision fatigue before**. And of course, young people are more likely to use social media, so there are opportunities for brands to capitalise on the visual appeal of social apps without using a new channel – for example, using attractive lifestyle photography in meal planning tools.

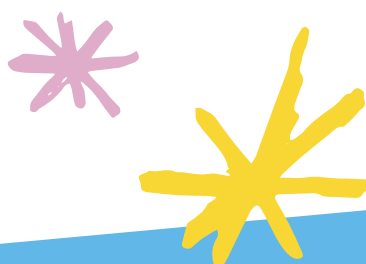
*"Nice, attractive images of ingredients and their health benefits would empower me to make positive changes to my diet."*

So how can we address all of these factors, from too many channels to hectic lifestyles? Evidence shows the benefits of meal planning tools already – something that brands should focus on promoting even more. For example, more than one in 10 (11%) of 25-34s would have more variety in their diet if they used these tools: that's also the group most likely to suffer from decision fatigue, at an alarming 89%.

And what about those busy households? Almost half (44%) of homes with two children said they would benefit from using these tools – this is the group also most likely to see a reduction in stress.

Finally, brands should address the **minor skills gap in the kitchen**. We want all of the UK to feel as confident in the kitchen as Londoners and over-65s. But for the small 28% who'd be put off by a recipe if they didn't have the skills, what can we do to help? Quick tutorial videos on tools like planning apps can increase confidence, particularly for time-poor full-time workers.

**With so many external influences shaping the way we cook, how does this impact our emotions?**



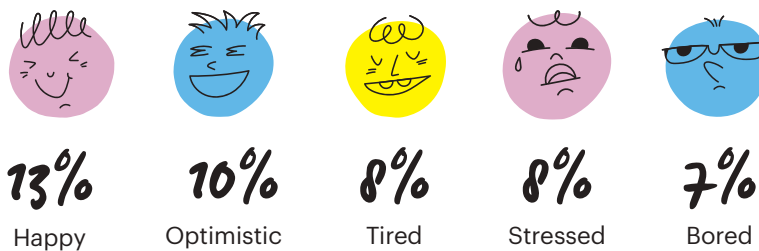


## The emotional impact of food

# How do we really feel about cooking, and what's got us reaching for takeaways?

Food affects mood, and mood affects food. From bingeing after a hard day to socialising with friends, there's a direct correlation between our eating habits and our general wellbeing. But how does the nation feel when cooking a main meal?

It's good news. The biggest emotion we felt in the kitchen was relaxed, at 25%. Despite worries about budgets, catering for dietary requirements and avoiding waste, 55% of us feel positive. We're also likely to feel:



It's heartening to see so many happy feelings here. In particular, the over-75s were most optimistic about cooking (17%) and an interesting second place was 18-24s at 12%. Looking for a relaxed meal? Head to Yorkshire and the Humber, where 30% of residents cook in a chilled-out manner.

When asked what was most enjoyable about cooking, it was a matter of taste. Hungry cooks are eager to 'eat the results' at 58%, while 42% were happy to see others enjoying their food. Women are more likely than men to worry about what other people think – again, perhaps reinforcing stereotypes with 47% to men's 38%.

*"I enjoy feeding my family, listening to podcasts or audiobooks while I cook."*

We're also shrewd observers. More than one-third (37%) of us like to know exactly what's in our food (whether processed or otherwise!), something that's especially prevalent in the over-55s. People in Wales are most likely to take comfort in knowing what they're eating, at 44%. Welsh people are also least likely to order a takeaway, with 24% saying they never have them.

# Bored Britain?

Boredom can certainly have us raiding the cupboards – but how does it affect our attitudes to cooking?

While only **7% of us feel bored by cooking**, we're not always excited by the meals themselves. At one time or another, **70% of us have felt uninspired** by our main meals – presenting the perfect opportunity for brands to promote experimental recipes.

Retired people are **least likely to be bored**, with **36% feeling this way less than once per week**. Families were most uninspired by their main meals, with **91% of households with more than three kids admitting to boredom**. Again, specific tips for children can help here, such as getting youngsters involved in the cooking to help them really enjoy the results.

## Happy eaters

Moving away from the boredom, food has amazing potential to turn our frowns upside down. A huge **57% of us look forward to mealtimes** during the day. Younger people are particularly motivated by them, with 32% strongly agreeing to the above statement. Meanwhile, older groups are most likely to find joy in the **sensory experience of cooking**. One-third of us enjoy the smells and tastes throughout the process, rising to 42% in the 65-74s.

Food is a huge motivator for those in Northern Ireland. They were the largest geographical group to say that having a meal to look forward to would boost their mood, at 27%. Contrastingly, Wales was least likely to be affected by the thought of food, with 8% 'strongly disagreeing'. This correlates with the region's relative dislike for takeaways – suggesting strong emotional ties between us and our beloved UPFs.



# What's got us reaching for the takeaways?

London, by comparison, is most likely to get a takeaway, with 4% of residents eating them 'always'. But they were more driven to do this based on trying something new – with 14% agreeing to this compared to the national average of 10.

This tallies with regional availability. London has nearly 10,000 takeaway options, while rural and semi-rural areas like Lancashire and Berkshire have the least choice.

Other incentives to opt for convenience foods were:

*"I often eat the same meal twice in a week because the pack is designed for two persons. There are numerous pre-prepared items like this on sale."*

## Treating myself

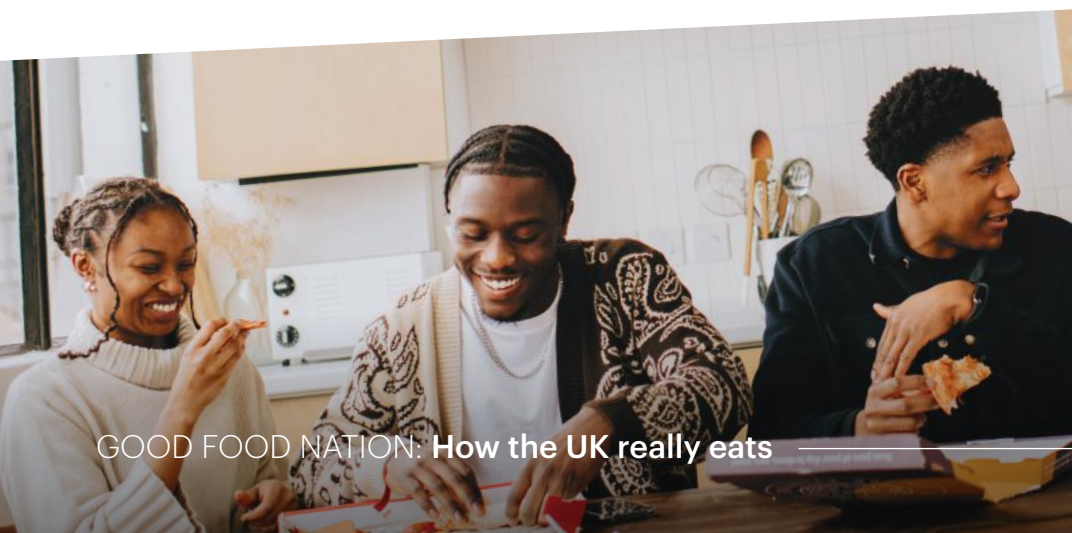
The nation seemingly cannot ignore the dopamine hit of a takeaway, with 40% seeing it as a treat. This category also had the biggest gulf between men and women. Just 37% of men cited this incentive, compared to 42% of women. Full-time students were most keen on a treat at 46%, correlating with the fact they were most likely to feel stressed in the kitchen at 12%.

## An easy fix

While 66% of us have the energy to cook, the other third might be reaching for the takeaway apps. There's a notable juxtaposition of working lifestyles here – while 40% of full-time workers lacked motivation, so did 45% of those not working. When thinking about ready meals specifically, some respondents cited speed or even cost for reduced-price goods. Of course, cheap and quick meals are just as accessible when made from scratch – but it's up to brands to promote this.

## Small numbers

Just a small number of us have takeaways because we're fatigued by decisions (26%). The same percentage do so because they are only cooking for themselves or one other person, often in divorced or widowed households. There's a positive here – an opportunity to promote batch cooking or using leftovers to cater for people's cost and sustainability needs.





## The practical approach

Emotions are undoubtedly a huge contributor to the way we eat – for example, 21% of people would buy pre-packaged foods to avoid stress. But note the practical angle too: **we're saving stress and therefore saving time, or anticipating an emotional reaction.**

For example, just 15% of us prefer to be spontaneous, whereas 17% would be deterred from meal planning in case of food waste. Other considerations include dietary restrictions, which are actually an incentive to go for convenience food with 6% of people. This is 50% higher in the over-75s, who may have other things to consider including medical conditions.

A small percentage (16%) of the choice-fatigued 18-24s say takeaways are comforting, so it's up to brands to push the comforting elements of cooking without overwhelming younger people. But we cannot overlook how our emotions are impacted by these other factors, including time management, fussy families and waste reduction. Thankfully, **there's one solution that fits all: meal planning.**



## Attitudes to meal planning

# What are the main benefits of meal planning and does it help us reduce stress?

Meal planning has enormous benefits for families or those trying to make their money go further. As a nation, we're a pretty diligent bunch – more than one-third (34%) plan our meals 'a few days in advance', as opposed to just 5% who make a last-minute decision.

But how do we feel about it? When looking at top priorities for the benefits of meal planning, the results presented a mixed bag across age groups:

Meal planning benefit	Biggest priority for age	%
Saves money on food	35-44	49%
Reduces food waste	55-64	48%
To stay organised	35-44	47%
Less decision fatigue	25-34	42%
Helps to eat fewer takeaways	35-44	39%
Stress reduction	35-44	38%
Shopping less often	55-64	37%
Saving time	25-44	37%
Healthier meals	55-74	36%
Limits UPFs	55-64	31%
Nutritional balance	65-74	25%
Sets family expectations	35-44	21%
Portion control	25-34	17%

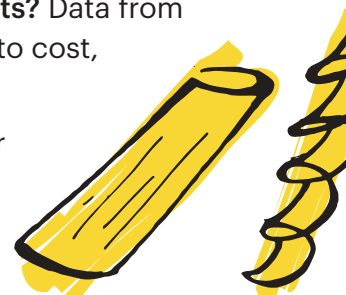


# Wasting away?

Economising takes centre stage, with **42% of us planning our meals to save cash**. Notably, the same number of us do so to reduce waste – but the priorities varied across age groups. This begs the question, **are we more interested in reducing waste to save the planet, or our wallets?** Data from WRAP states that waste is only fifth among our concerns compared to cost, nutrition, UPFs and animal welfare. Our data suggests otherwise.



When splitting this priority by social group, we see that higher disposable income ABC1s plan meals to avoid food waste more than lower disposable income C2DEs (45% vs. 39%). This suggests **social consciousness rather than reducing food waste to save money**.



What's more, eating sustainably has health benefits, too – so it's no surprise to see a correlation between older generations wanting to reduce waste and enjoy healthier meals. This positive trend suggests more generalised awareness. In years gone by, young people and even children appeared to be more into 'greener eating'. It's great to see this impacting all age groups.





## Stress-busting

Organisation and stress-busting go hand-in-hand with meal planning, and 35-44s benefit most. As the third-highest priority, 'it helps me to be organised' is crucial for those in this age bracket, as well as full-time workers at 45%. This rises to 49% in households with two children, and 51% for those with young children aged five to 11. Clearly, there is a **strong relationship between meal planning and general day-to-day routines**, such as organising school lunches.

Parents are more likely to value cost, too, with 46% planning meals to save money. This in turn can **help with reducing financial stress**, while planned meals have an overall positive effect on our mood. More than one in 10 (15%) reported feeling happy while cooking planned meals, compared to just 6% of spontaneous cooks.

**There are some interesting contradictions here, too.** Those working fewer than eight hours per week valued organisation highest at 61%. This group was most likely to say that they had an inconsistent schedule, at 19% compared to the national average of 14%. Notably, parents also valued organisation at 49%, suggesting other caring responsibilities such as children or those with additional needs could be a factor.

In another contradiction, 17% of respondents feared that meal planning might actually lead to more waste. This was highest for parents of teenagers aged 17-18 – perhaps reflecting concerns of changing social plans in this unpredictable age group.

Sources of stress in modern lifestyles range from running families to keeping costs low, and they're taking their toll on us. It's no wonder, then, that many of us simply want to 'reduce mental effort'. **Brands can facilitate this, from handy leftover tips for unpredictable teenagers to budget-friendly ingredients.**

# Lightening the mental load

Many of us take comfort in repetition. Those who said they ate the same meal more than once per week did so to 'avoid having to think too much' or are simply too exhausted.

Likewise, 35% of us value organisation, with women far more likely to than men (41% to 28%). This is actually valued higher than avoiding decision fatigue – though it's different across varying age groups and cooking responsibilities.

Again, decision fatigue in younger people may be down to the breadth of channels available. The age group using the biggest range of channels was the 25-34s at 95%, with almost one-third (32%) turning to cookbooks for inspiration. Pinterest was the most-used app among those with decision fatigue at 44%, known for its tempting visual meal ideas.

This aligns with the fact that 18% of us use social media to help plan our meals, rising significantly to 34% in the 25-34s. But we're also likely to be influenced by what people around us think. More than one-quarter (27%) discuss meal plans with others, rising to 33% in households with children, and even higher at 37% for homes with fussy 12 to 16-year-olds.

Where can brands intervene here? By using consistent messaging across their apps and social media, and encouraging discourse – for example: "Let us know in the comments what you thought of this recipe".

*"I'm too exhausted to think about food. I don't want to be in the kitchen."*

## Help is at hand

From reducing waste to lowering costs, the benefits of meal planning are clear. What the nation is looking for is a little steer in the right direction with planning – particularly as a stress-buster.

This stress is most likely to affect younger people. Almost one-quarter (23%) of 18-34s say they often feel stressed when thinking about what to eat, and **one in five 25-34s are often stressed while shopping**.

Here is where meal planning tools can come into their own. Aside from relieving decision fatigue, they can also **improve our nutritional intake**. For example, one in 10 households with children say they would have more variety in their diet if they used a tool, alongside 11% of 25 to 34-year-olds.

Apps can help with day-to-day meal organisation, looking at factors like cost and waste reduction. With budget-friendly meal plans, cooking tutorials and saved recipes, these resources are ideal for a range of ages and lifestyles.





## The takeaways for brands

Having noted the barriers to cooking and the benefits of meal planning, brands can set about making positive changes. First, we should think about accessibility and overwhelm, for example:

- \* Using **clear, jargon-free language** in product labelling to address UPFs and nutritional value
- \* **Segmenting preferred channels by age group** and positioning products accordingly, for example, repurposing long-form recipe book content into short-form social media videos
- \* Factoring in other concerns such as **cost per serving or tips for using leftovers** to combat waste
- \* Tailoring content based on **personas**, such as fast meals for working parents or simple recipes for those with neurodivergence/additional needs
- \* Keeping information consistent across all channels, on and offline, to avoid overload

**Food should bring people together, whatever the occasion.** (Note our separate study on Christmas cooking for 2026.) Our findings illustrate the ways we can use meal planning to address the nation's unique challenges and help us get back to our best – enjoying good food.

*Find out more about meal planning at Good Food.*



*How the UK really eats:*

## Final thoughts



This year's Good Food Nation report highlights the broader macro factors affecting our everyday eating habits. As the cost of living crisis rages on, those feeling the pinch hardest are families, who are compelled to be more creative with batch cooking and shopping around. Brands should focus on these influences and tailor content accordingly, emphasising how **planning can cut costs and up nutritional value**.

Technology is invariably a huge factor. While it may cause '**decision fatigue**' in younger generations, it can also help us plan meals, budget and generally find inspiration. It's interesting to note the generational disparities in technology use. Those less likely to rely on tools like social media may prefer the 'traditional approach' – but conversely, these **older generations are also more open to experimentation**. Flexible meal planning tools can meet all these needs, reducing overwhelm with simple ingredient lists and clear, inspiring images.

Food is steeped in tradition, and we still see the effects of this today. Family-based cooking continues to pose more challenges, particularly with **costs and unpredictable schedules**. Women may bear the brunt of this, including the mental load of worrying about costs or pleasing others. They're also most likely to engage in meal planning, presenting a stronger case for planning tools.

But we're also seeing more modern trends emerge. The 2026 report puts the spotlight on previously undervalued issues, such as **disabilities and neurodivergence**. Outside of the traditional sphere of cost and routines, this is becoming a crucial factor in the nation's cooking. This puts more emphasis on segmentation, adding in considerations for recipes such as simplicity – ideal for vulnerable people whose diets may not be as diverse as they should be.

The modern age is also giving rise to more anxiety. Echoing the trends from 2025, **younger generations continue to face information overload**, likely exacerbated by the range of digital channels. They're also more likely to be exposed to misinformation, as seen with studies on TikTok. Brands should aim for consistency across all channels to reduce this overload. Having all the key information in one place, such as a meal planning app, will also reduce anxiety.

However, food is also linked to much happier emotions. It's encouraging to see that **most of us feel relaxed when cooking** – even if the planning stages are exhausting. Planning apps and brands should home in on this, extolling the mental health benefits of cooking while offsetting the stress of planning with clear, accessible steps.

As we look forward to 2027, we do see change afoot. Older generations are becoming more cognisant of things like nutritional value and sustainability. Again, this is likely thanks to better access to information online, with internet search ranking second for top sources of inspiration. The challenge for younger generations, particularly those raising families, is to **strike the balance between nutrition, cost and scheduling issues**. Our resources can address each of these problems in one place.

**At Good Food, we're building on our learnings every year, seeking to acknowledge both long-term macro factors and emerging trends. This year's findings serve to guide brands in shaping their product and marketing strategies.**

**With fully accessible meal planning resources for all ages, we're helping the nation overcome 'decision fatigue' and better enjoy what's on their plate.**

