

Supermarket special offers exposed

We uncover the supermarket special offers that aren't so special



Supermarket shelves are full to bursting with special offers, but Which? research has found that some of them aren't that special. Our three-month investigation found offers that broke the government guidelines and could mislead consumers.

New rules

We bought the same basket of food once a week in the major supermarkets, and tracked the price of more than 100 wines online. This was to test the new government guidelines, introduced in May, which are intended to ensure that offers don't mislead you.

Trading standards pricing expert Martin Fisher explains the rules: 'Immediately before an item goes on offer, it should be at the higher price for

IN BRIEF

In this report we help you to:

- decide whether special offers really are good value for money
- avoid offers that could leave you out of pocket
- reduce food waste, which can be caused by buy-one-get-one-free offers.

28 days in that store. In the long run, it shouldn't be on offer for longer than it's been at the higher price. That's unless the supermarket displays a sign saying otherwise. The only other exception is if something is going out of date.

These rules differ from the old ones because previously items didn't have to be at the higher price for as long as they are on offer. The rules are also tighter with regard to perishable goods.

Not-so-special offers

We found several offers that broke the guidelines, including:

- Sainsbury's wine that was only at the higher price for a week in two months.
- Waitrose blueberries that were only at the higher price for two weeks before being sold at half price for six weeks.
- M&S cherries that were sold as 'half price' – but had only been sold at the higher price for 17 days, a whole month

before the offer.

While not all offers broke the rules, others could hardly be described as 'special'. For instance:

- Sainsbury's cherries that were sold at half price for weeks. A sign said they were at the higher price for seven days.
- Strawberries and bacon that were on offer for the whole of our three-month investigation. Full results are on page 24.

Your views

According to our survey, nearly three quarters of you think special offers are good value – though our research shows that sometimes this isn't the case. More than half of you often buy things you weren't intending to, because they are on offer.

We did find lots of products that complied with the rules, but we think there's more work to be done to make sure that special offers are always genuine.

OUR RESEARCH

We tracked the price of a basket of food items between June and August 2008 in Tesco, Waitrose, Sainsbury's, Asda, Morrisons and Marks & Spencer, and more than 100 wines online at Tesco and Sainsbury's in July and August. We asked 3,039 Which? online panel members their views on special offers in April and May.



Which? online Consumer protection

Confused about what shops can and can't do? Go to www.which.co.uk/consumerprotection for a guide to the practices that companies are banned from using under the new Consumer Protection Regulations.

The worst offenders: offers that could leave you confused

OFFERS THAT BROKE THE GUIDELINES

According to Trading Standards, these offers do not comply with the new government guidelines – we think they could be misleading

Supermarket	Product	Higher price	Offer price	What we found
Marks & Spencer	Cherries, 350g 	£2.99	£2.49	Marked as 'half price' at £2.49, which implies a saving of £2.49 – but you're actually saving only 50p on the previous price of £2.99, and even then you could get two for £5 in a multibuy. M&S said they had been £4.99 a month before.
Sainsbury's	Blueberries, 225g 	£3.99	£1.99	Bought at 'half price' for five weeks, but even when they were at the higher price of £3.99 (which was for two weeks only) they were available as a multibuy priced at 'two for £5'.
Sainsbury's	Gallo Cabernet Zinfandel and Chardonnay Sauvignon 	£4.99	£3.99	Recorded as '£1 off' for five weeks, then briefly returned to the higher price of £4.99 for one week – before going back to £1 off.
Sainsbury's	Jacobs Creek Chardonnay	£6.79	£4.79	Only recorded at £6.79 for two non-consecutive weeks in 10 weeks.
Waitrose	Blueberries, 225g 	£3.99	£1.99	These were bought at 'half price' for six weeks, but had been at the higher price for only two weeks beforehand.

OFFERS THAT NEEDED A SIGN TO EXPLAIN THEM

The offers below complied with the guidelines, but only because there was a sign explaining the offer to consumers

Supermarket	Product	Higher price	Offer price	What we found
Morrisons	King prawns, large king prawns 	£5.50 to £3.79	£2.79 to £1.79	Always at 'half price' ^a . A sign said they had been at the higher price in other stores, but not this one.
Sainsbury's	Cherries, 300g 	£3.99	£1.99	'Half price' for six weeks. A sign said that they had been at the higher price for only seven days.

SPECIAL OFFERS THAT LASTED FOR THREE MONTHS

These items were on offer for the whole of our three-month investigation, or for all the time they were available

Supermarket	Product	Higher price	Offer price	What we found
Marks & Spencer	British outdoor bred unsmoked back bacon, 200g 	£3.69	£3.19	50p off for three months ^a .
Waitrose	Strawberries, 450g 	£3.99	£1.99	On offer for 12 weeks – 'half price' for 11 weeks and multibuy for the next week.
Waitrose	Waitrose cherries, 600g 	£7.99	£5.59 or £3.99	On offer for eight weeks and then unavailable.
Tesco	Strawberries, 454g 	£3.99	£1.99	These were on offer for the whole three months, including nine weeks at 'half price'.

Fruit varieties and country of origin varied for some fruit products. a The type varied b Unavailable for two weeks

Tricks to get your trade

Have you ever wondered why there's not much on your left when you walk into a supermarket? It's no accident. Jeff Bray, senior lecturer in retail at Bournemouth University, explains how supermarkets convince us to buy more special offers.

1 'When we walk into a shop, 70% of us look to the right,' says Jeff, 'so the strongest offers are often there.' If you look next time you shop, you'll find there's probably very little on the left.

2 Manufacturers use large, brightly coloured signs on the shelves and hanging from the ceiling, as these make us think that the offer's significant. 'Once we see the sign, we don't always check how much we're saving, so companies use these even if you're only saving a few pence,' says Jeff.

3 If the offer requires you to send off for your discount – for instance, you send the manufacturer a voucher from the packet and they'll send you £1 back – then Jeff says to think twice: 'Research suggests that only 4% of us actually send off for the money back.'

4 Experts used to say that offers were on gondola ends (the ends of supermarket aisles) because your trolley causes you to slow down – so you're more likely to notice the products there. However, research now shows that we spend most of our time in supermarkets staring at the floor. Jeff says: 'Don't be surprised if you start seeing offers advertised under your feet!'

Multibuy offers add to waste

Three in 10 members said that buy-one-get-one-free (Bogof) offers cause them to throw food away.

In the UK we waste 6.7m tonnes of food a year – roughly a third of everything we buy. This includes 5.1m potatoes, 4.4m apples and 1m slices of ham every day.



Families with children waste an average of £610 a year on food that ends up being thrown away. So instead of overloading yourself with Bogof deals you can't use, save money by only buying what you need.

While Bogof tins of cat food may last for ages, consider whether you can use the fresh food you buy before taking advantage of a Bogof offer.

If you find yourself with an overflowing fridge and cupboards, try these tips:

1 ZERO WASTE For tips to help you reduce food waste, log on to www.lovefoodhatewaste.com. The site is packed with practical advice on keeping food fresher for longer, plus a range of recipes that use leftovers. Try using their portion planner which suggests how much to cook, depending on who's coming for dinner, and ways to measure it.

2 CHECK USE-BY DATES Regularly check the use-by dates of what's in your fridge so you can use up things that are near to going off.

3 FREEZE IT If you're unable to use food before it goes out of date, put it in the freezer. Many foods can be frozen, including bread, meat, fish and soup.

Supermarkets respond to our findings



'It is never our intention to mislead customers, but to offer excellent value for money. In light of these findings we'll be reviewing our approach to special offers.'

delivering the best value while following regulations. It's good to have these findings so that we can continue to fulfil our obligations.'



'We always strive to meet the voluntary guidelines and would not at any time seek to mislead customers. Your report has highlighted a few incidents where signage had not been updated and training will be repeated to avoid this happening in future.'



'All three types of prawn were at the higher price in over 70 stores, just never the store you bought them in. There would have been a sign saying this.'



'We have clear policies in place to follow the guidelines, and all our offers and savings are genuine. Competition among retailers is strong and we're absolutely focused on



'We always aim to offer our customers excellent value and follow guidelines on promotions wherever possible. For the bacon, unfortunately we made a mistake with the ticketing of this product and apologise to our customers. We rectified it straight away.'

THE VIEW FROM TRADING STANDARDS

Avoid misleading offers and be a canny shopper

We gave our results to trading standards officer Martin Fisher, who highlighted those offers he felt did not comply with the special offers guidelines.

He said: 'The results strongly suggest that there's plenty more work to be done in getting supermarkets to comply with the rules.'

He also said that even some offers that complied with the

rules were still worrying – for instance, if the supermarket put up a sign saying that the higher price only applied for a very short time.

Martin thinks that special offers encourage us to spend more than we would otherwise, which can mean we make bad choices. His advice about being a canny shopper is simple: 'We tend to buy on



"biggest discount" rather than "cheapest". Just because it's 70% off doesn't mean it's cheap, so shop around.'

WHICH? SAYS

We all like to find a good deal, but our findings show that consumers could be misled, and that not all offers are as good as they seem.

We think that supermarkets need to make sure they comply with the new guidelines and the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008. We'd like to see them complying with the spirit, not just the letter, of the law.

If you see pricing that you think is misleading, contact Consumer Direct on 0845 404 0506.

SPECIAL OFFERS*

We tested supermarket price claims for three months and found dubious offers that might mislead customers

*THAT AREN'T SO SPECIAL



With food prices rising we are all looking for money-off deals. So we decided to investigate supermarket special offers to find out if they are as good as they seem. We bought a basket of goods in Asda, Marks & Spencer, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose every week for three months, and tracked wine prices online. We found offers that we think might mislead consumers – with some items on the shelves at 'half price' after only days at the higher price.

Genuine deals can only be a good thing, but there's a difference between cheap food and offers that might mislead you into thinking you're getting an extra-special bargain when you're not. This is especially important because of the way special offers dictate our buying habits – 59% of you say that you swap items you were intending to buy for those on special offer, and 38% say they frequently buy things that they weren't intending to because they are on offer*. Certain types of special offers, such as multibuys, are also causing some of us to throw out food, which is a waste of money and detrimental to the environment.

GOOD DEAL GUIDELINES

There are government guidelines intended to ensure any offers are a good deal. These say:

- An item should be at the higher price for 28 days before being on offer.
 - Overall, it shouldn't be on offer for longer than it was at the higher price.
- However, supermarkets don't have to do either of these if they put up a sign explaining their offer, or if something is going out of date. The rules also say that what's reasonable will depend on the individual circumstances.

This means that even offers we felt weren't good enough were still potentially compliant with the rules. Here are some examples of what our investigation uncovered:

- Asda raspberries advertised as part of the cut-price 'rollback' scheme when they weren't.
- Sainsbury's cherries at half price for eight weeks when it admitted they were only at the higher price for 15 days.
- Tesco Hardys Crest Cabernet Shiraz Merlot 75cl on offer for 12 weeks out of 14.
- Waitrose blueberries discounted for 10 weeks out of 14, and Marks & Spencer blueberries on offer for 13 weeks out of 14.
- Morrisons 250g packs of cherries not at the higher price in the shop we bought them (though it said there was a sign explaining this).

EXPERT VIEW

BE CLEAR ON PRICING



There are a huge number of 'special offers' in supermarkets. Despite this, the price of food is increasing faster than prices overall. This research shows that there's plenty more to be done to make prices in supermarkets clearer, and help us to control the real cost of what we buy.

And this certainly isn't the first time we've uncovered problems with supermarket pricing. When we carried out an investigation in 2008, we found similar pricing issues on products including fruit, wine and other groceries.

When we focused on wine 'special offers' earlier this year, our wine expert said that only one out of 10 wines he tasted would have been good value at the full price.

And when we asked you to send us examples of 'special offers' that you perceived to be 'ridiculous', we found that we received plenty of photos.

We'll be exploring ways to address these issues with both retailers and the government. Get in touch to tell us your views – email homeeditor@which.co.uk.

JOHN HOLMES

Principal economist
homeeditor@which.co.uk

We looked at a number of products that seem to be on offer frequently, such as cheese, bacon and fruit. We found that, of all the items that were often on offer, it was the fruit that had the greatest potential to baffle consumers.









Martin Fisher, pricing expert at the Trading Standards Institute, says there's more that can be done to ensure that special offers are transparent and easy for consumers to understand. He told us: 'Consumers could be made to feel they're getting an unbeatable, special bargain when they're not.'

We think that even some of the offers that had a sign explaining the offer in more detail might still confuse shoppers – especially as those in a hurry are unlikely to spend the time reading small disclaimers.



ARE SEASONAL FRUIT OFFERS TOO CONFUSING? Tell us what you think about special offers – do you think they generally offer good value? Do you buy things you weren't intending to? Do you think supermarkets need to be more transparent? Go to www.which.co.uk/specialoffers

WHAT'S ON OFFER? Our weekly spot checks suggest these items weren't at the higher price for long, which could make them seem better value than they are.

	PRODUCT TYPE AND PACK SIZE	WAS PRICE	OFFER PRICE	WHAT WE FOUND
ASDA	 ASDA Strawberries 400g	£2.17	£1.87	We never saw them at the higher price.
	 ASDA Raspberries 225g	£2.97	£2	They were sold for a number of weeks on 'rollback'. We never saw them on sale at the higher price.
	 ASDA First Cape Café Collection Crisp and Fruity White Wine 75cl	£5.28	£3	The highest price we saw this at was £4.98.
MORRISONS	 MORRISONS UK Strawberries 400g	£4	£1.90	These were half price for five non-consecutive weeks. Morrisons admitted they were only sold for seven days at full price.
	 MORRISONS Cherries 200g	£3	£1.50	We bought them on four occasions when they were half price. Morrisons said that they were only at the higher price for two weeks.
	 MORRISONS Cherries 250g	£4	£2	They were available to buy on three occasions when they were half price in a 'was £4 now £2' deal. But they were never available for us to buy at the higher price at the shop where we bought them during our three-month check. Morrisons said they were at the higher price in other shops.
M&S	 MARKS & SPENCER Sweet Jubilee Strawberries 300g	£3.99 then £2.99	£1.99	We never found these on sale at £3.99.
	 MARKS & SPENCER Cherries 500g	£7.99	£3.99	These were half price on the four occasions we managed to buy them. We didn't see the 500g pack on sale at the higher price, although packs of 450g were available at the higher price for two weeks before going on offer.
	 MARKS & SPENCER UK Strawberries 400g	£3.99 then £2.49	£1.99	We only found these on sale at the higher price of £3.99 for one week. They were on offer for seven weeks.
	 MARKS & SPENCER Blueberries 150g, 200g and 225g	£4.99 £3.99 or £3.49	£2.49	Although pack sizes varied, blueberries were always on offer whenever we managed to buy them (apart from one week, when 150g packs weren't on offer). No matter what size or offer, a pack of blueberries was £2.49.

SUPERMARKETS RESPOND

We challenged the supermarkets with the results of our investigation. This is how they explained what we found:

ASDA

'Asda strawberries and 225g packs of raspberries were mistakenly advertised as "rollback". First Cape wine was sold at £5.28 and then £4.98 for the required period, however the wrong higher price was shown. These were all due to human error and will be rectified.'

MARKS & SPENCER

'We always aim to follow guidelines on promotions and had done so here. This summer, due to the changes in the weather and the issues we have had with crop availability, we have, where appropriate, referred to a previous higher price which was not available for the full 28 days. Where we had further reductions,

we detailed intervening prices and made clear comparisons to enable our customers to understand these promotions. We always explain our offers and the price comparisons we make with in-store ticketing and décor.'









MORRISONS

'400g punnets of strawberries were on sale for seven days at the higher price. 200g packs of cherries were on sale for 14 days at the full price. 250g packs of cherries were on sale for seven days at the full price in many stores, though not in the shop

you bought them from. These offers complied with guidelines, as this information would have been displayed at point of sale.'

SAINSBURY'S

'UK strawberries were at the higher price for seven days. Raspberries were at the higher price for 14 days. We would never seek to mislead our customers, and so clearly communicated this information in stores. Packs of cherries were at the higher price for 15 days. However, due to human error this information was not displayed at point of sale. We apologise.'

	PRODUCT TYPE AND PACK SIZE	WAS PRICE	OFFER PRICE	WHAT WE FOUND
Sainsbury's	 SAINSBURY'S Cherries 250g	£4	£2	They were half price during the eight weeks out of 10 we were able to buy them. Sainsbury's said they were at the higher price for 15 days.
	 SAINSBURY'S UK Strawberries 400g	£4	£2	These were half price for nine weeks out of the 10 they were available. Sainsbury's said that they were at the higher price for seven days before going on offer.
	 SAINSBURY'S Raspberries 225g	£4	£2	These were on sale at half price during the seven weeks when we could buy them. Sainsbury's said that they were at the higher price for 14 days.
TESCO	 TESCO UK Strawberries 400g	£3.99 then £2.99	£1.99	These were discounted for the 12 weeks they were available. We never managed to buy them at the higher price of £3.99.
	 TESCO Cherries 250g	£3.99	£1.99	These were half price for the seven weeks they were available. We didn't manage to buy them at the higher price.
	 TESCO Raspberries 225g	£3.99	£1.99	These were half price for six weeks. We never managed to buy them at the higher price.
	 TESCO Hardys Crest Cabernet Shiraz Merlot 75cl	£10.99	£5.49 or £7.99	Was on offer for 12 weeks out of 14. For 10 of these it was half price – 'was £10.99 now £5.49'; for the other two weeks it was sold in a 'was £10.99 now £7.99' deal.
Waitrose	 WAITROSE UK Strawberries 400g	£3.99	£1.99	We only managed to buy these at the higher price for one week. They were then advertised as 'half price' for ten weeks.
	 WAITROSE Cherries 450g	£6.99 then £4.99	£3.49	These were on offer on all seven occasions we managed to buy them, five times at 'half price'. We never found them for sale at the higher price of £6.99.
	 WAITROSE Raspberries 200g	£3.79	£1.89	They were only available for us to buy at the higher price for two weeks – while also on multibuy (£3.79 each or two for £5). They were then advertised as half price for ten weeks.
	 WAITROSE Blueberries 180g/200g	£3.99	£1.99	These were half price for ten weeks before being offered at £2.89 or '2 for £4'. For the first three weeks the pack size was 180g; afterwards it was 200g – the same price was charged for both.

TESCO

'We have strict rules in place on pricing. We regret that these rules were not followed in these instances but can reassure customers that mistakes such as these are rare.'

WAITROSE

'We would never intend to mislead customers. We're nearing the end of a piece of research (including advice from trading standards) to ensure our special offers are absolutely within the framework of the law, and are completely clear to consumers.'

which? WORKS FOR YOU

Which? wants debate and scrutiny around the rising cost of food. We want a better understanding of why prices are rising and what can be done.

We want consumers to have accurate information that allows them to control their shopping bills, so want special offers that provide genuine value for money. We also want greater price transparency that enables shoppers to compare product prices easily.

Over the coming months we'll be talking to retailers, food manufacturers and producers,



experts and government about these issues. We'll be making sure that consumers' concerns are properly understood and that sensible, practical steps are taken to give us value for money.

Supermarket special offers exposed

Which? researchers checked 700,000 prices to reveal the full story behind dodgy offers in your supermarket



Products that were increased in price for a few days - before being 'discounted' for weeks



SAINSBURY'S



TESCO



ASDA



ASDA

	SAINSBURY'S	TESCO	ASDA	ASDA
Product types (pack size)	The Black Farmer Premium Pork Sausages (six pack - 400g)	Blueberries Class 1 (225g)	Innocent Pure Fruit Smoothie Mangoes & Passion Fruits (750ml)	Pringles Original (165g)
Was price	£2.79	£3.99	£2.79	£1.97
Offer price(s)	£2	£1.99	£1.50/£2/£2.50	£1
Days on this offer	34	52	87	37
What we found	Increased in price from £2.59 to £2.79 for six days before going on offer	Increased in price from £1.80 to £3.99 for 14 days before going on offer	Increased in price from £2 to £2.79 for 19 days before going on offer	Increased in price from £1 to £1.98 for four days before going on offer

Whether you shop for groceries in store or online, you're going to be bombarded with special offers designed to persuade you that you're getting a bargain. Previous Which? research has shown that some offers may be misleading (*Which?*, November 2011, p16), so we decided to investigate further. In our largest ever look at special offers, Which? researchers trawled through more than 700,000 supermarket prices looking at both discounts and multibuy. We found dubious offers that affect everything from pet food and fresh fruit to toiletries and wine.

We found a whole range of tactics designed to make bargains look unmissable when, in fact, we don't think they were really bargains at all. These tactics include products sold with 'was' prices that hadn't applied during our tracking and others that increased in price for a few days before being sold 'on offer' for months.

When we looked at multibuy, we found products that were more expensive per item when they went on multibuy than they were beforehand. We also looked at products that were on offer for longer than they were at the higher price, which leads us to ask, which price is the real one?

We've examined a year's worth of data – here are some of the examples of what we believe are misleading offers, uncovered by our investigation:

- Asda doubled the price of a single Müller yogurt from 30p to 61p as they went onto multibuy at 10 for £4. The price went back to 30p when the offer ended. This meant the yogurt cost more per item when you bought 10 under the offer than when you bought one before or after it.
- Aquafresh Milk Teeth Toothpaste was labelled as 'was £1.74, now £1.15' at Asda. The highest price it was sold at before the offer was £1.17, during our tracking.
- Tesco sold Beck's beer for 190 days on discount and only 70 days at the higher price.
- Ocado strawberries increased in price from £3.89 to £4.38 for 13 days. They were then sold as 'was £4.38 now £2.19/£2.29/£2.25' for 112 days, though there were nine days within this period when they were sold at £4.38.

We think that all these offers were misleading for shoppers, who would think they were getting a better deal than they actually were.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

We also found other pricing tactics that were less than clear. We saw items that yo-yoed between discount and multibuy. For instance one product was sold as 'was £3.46 now £3' – except that it was on multibuy at 2 for £6 for the majority of time it was at the higher price of £3.46. So provided you bought two, it was £3 all along. We've included two instances of this in the table on p24, but we saw multiple examples.

We saw multibuy offers advertised with end dates, but found that the offers lasted for most of the year. For example, one product was sold for £2.19 each or 3 for £5, and the offer was said to be ending in a week's time. But the following week it was still on offer at a slightly different price – 2 for £3. We feel these offers could encourage shoppers to stock up on products unnecessarily.

When we asked you whether special offers have an impact on your shopping habits, almost two fifths said >



ASDA

New Covent Garden Food Co
Leek & Potato Soup (600g)

£1.97

£1/£1.50

87

Increased in price from
£1.50 to £1.97 for five days
before going on offer



OCADO

Strawberries
(400g)

£4.38

£2.19/£2.25/£2.29

112







Increased in price from
£3.89 to £4.38 for 13 days
before going on offer

PHOTOGRAPHY BY: EUGENIO FRANCHI

Products that weren't sold at the higher price immediately before going on offer

						
	ASDA	ASDA	ASDA	ASDA	ASDA	ASDA
Product types (pack size)	Aquafresh Milk Teeth Toothpaste 0-3 Years (50ml)	Burton's Jammie Dodgers (150g)	First Cape Café Collection White (750ml)	Napolina Chopped Tomatoes in Tomato Juice (4x400g)	Pedigree Chunks in Gravy Selection (12x400g)	Wolf Blass Yellow Label Rosé (750ml)
Was price	£1.74	£1.15	£5.28	£3.97/£3.98	£7.21	£8.98
Offer price(s)	£1/£1.16/£1.17	50p/70p	£3	£1.50/£2/£3	£6/£5	£5.98/£8.18
Days on this offer	35	29	48	74	77	73
What we found	The highest price during our tracking was £1.18	The only time it was sold at £1.15 was 170 days earlier	The highest price during our tracking was £4.98	It wasn't sold at £3.97 before the offer, during our tracking	The highest price during our tracking was £6.25	It wasn't sold at £8.98 before the offer, during our tracking

Products that were increased in price as they went onto multibuy

						
	ASDA	ASDA	MORRISONS	TESCO	ASDA	MORRISONS
Product types (pack size)	Asda Extra Special Wiltshire Cure Unsmoked Back Bacon (240g)	Hartley's Best Raspberry Jam (340g)	Innocent Pure Fruit Smoothie Mangoes & Passion Fruits (750ml)	L'Oréal Elvive Colour Protect UV Filter Conditioner (250ml)	Müller Light Cherry Yogurt Fat Free (175g)	Müller Rice Strawberry & Original (6x190g)
Price each before multibuy	£2.18	£1.20	£2 promo discount	£2	30p	£1.64 promo discount
Price each during multibuy	£2.84	£1.35	£2.79	£2.25	61p	£3.28/£3.29
Multibuy offer	2 for £5	2 for £2.50	2 for £5	3 for 2	10 for £4	2 for £5
What we found	The multibuy makes the product more expensive per pack than it was before the multibuy offer	The multibuy makes the product more expensive per jar than it was before the multibuy offer	The multibuy makes the product more expensive per carton than it was before the multibuy offer	It looks like you're saving 75p per bottle, but you're actually saving 50p	It was more expensive per tub when you bought 10 than it was before the multibuy offer	The multibuy makes the product more expensive per tub than it was before the multibuy offer

they encouraged you to buy products you didn't really need, and a third bought a special offer you'd regretted. In fact, a quarter of you even try to avoid end-of-aisle displays so that you don't get sucked into buying special offers.







In this investigation, we highlight four problems we found with special offers. We've collected examples of each (above and

on p22). We found dozens of other examples of confusing pricing, but many were so complicated it was impossible to say what the actual cost was. See 'How do supermarkets get away with it?' (opposite) to find out why the official guidelines on pricing are contributing to these problems, and how the supermarkets justify their prices.

WHICH? RESEARCH

We looked at a year's worth of data (31 January 2011 to 1 February 2012) from independent grocery shopping website MySupermarket.co.uk. We've selected a snapshot of examples that clearly illustrate different pricing problems. We also surveyed 1,802 UK residents online in February 2012.

Products on offer for much longer than they were sold at the higher price

						
	SAINSBURY'S	TESCO	TESCO	TESCO	TESCO	ASDA
Product types (pack size)	Asparagus (250g)	Beck's (6x275ml)	Hardys Crest Cabernet Shiraz Merlot (750ml)	Hardys Crest Chardonnay Pinot Noir Australian Sparking Wine (750ml)	Hardys Stamp Shiraz Cabernet Sauvignon Australia (750ml)	Philadelphia Original (300g)
Was price	£3	£6.79	£10.99/£10.49	£12.99/£13.99	£7.79	£2.37
Offer price(s)	£1.50	£4.50/£5	£5.29/£5.40/ £5.49/£7.99	£6.99/£6.49/ £5.99	£4.99/£4/ £5.79/£5.29	£1/£1.77/ £1.97/£2.12
Days on this offer	63	190	171	199	155	73
What we found	Spent 14 days at the higher price before the offer, with a sign explaining the offer	Only spent 70 days during our tracking at the higher price	Only spent 140 days during our tracking at the higher price	Only spent 138 days during our tracking at the higher price	Only spent 86 days during our tracking at the higher price	The only time it is sold at £2.37 during our tracking was 42 days earlier, when it increased in price from £2.12 for 11 days

How do supermarkets get away with it?

Government guidelines on pricing are supposed to make sure that supermarkets' special offers don't mislead us. For discounts these state that:

- the 'was' price should be the most recent price it was sold at for 28 consecutive days
- the product shouldn't ordinarily be on offer for longer than it was at the higher price.

But supermarkets don't have to do any of these if they put up a sign explaining their offer, eg by stating the date something was at

a higher price. The rules also say that what's reasonable depends on the individual circumstances, and they don't say anything substantial about multibuy offers apart from to be fair and reasonable. These mean that even offers we thought weren't good enough potentially complied with the rules.

WHICH? SAYS

Which? wants the guidelines to be tightened so they are clearer, with fewer exceptions.

We're calling on the government to take action, and will update you on any changes.

We think that it's time supermarkets sorted out their own pricing. We've been calling on them to show clear unit pricing – the price by weight, volume or unit – so that you can easily compare what you're buying. We also want them sort out special offers so that they're exactly that – special. For more information go to www.which.co.uk/unitpricing.



What the supermarkets say

TESCO

'We're committed to helping our customers keep their costs down. We change millions of price labels in store and online each week and we sometimes make mistakes, for which we apologise. We make every effort to ensure we act in accordance with government guidelines on price promotions.'

ASDA

'We are only human, and occasionally we make mistakes. By and large our systems and procedures ensure those instances are kept to an absolute minimum, but when we do get it wrong, we put our hands up to say sorry, and put things right as quickly as possible.'

M MORRISONS

'We use different promotional mechanics – multibuy and discounted single unit price – to ensure all our customers can enjoy lower prices at different times. The multibuy price is always cheaper per unit than the standard price, as the lower prices were promotional discounts.'

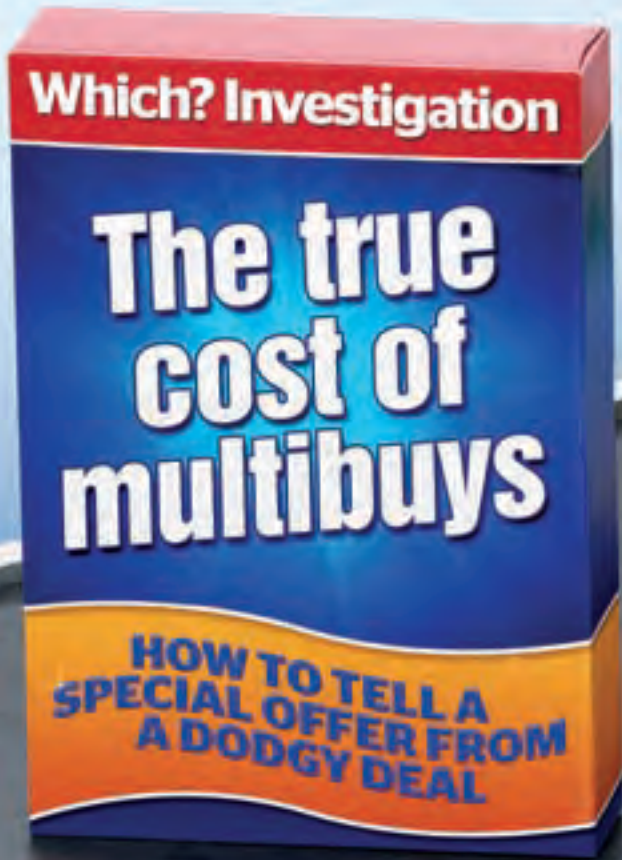
ocado

'Ocado has thousands of special offers and is committed to providing clear and accurate information about our offers. Regrettably on this one isolated occasion, this specific promotion did not explain our offer in the required detail. Measures have now been put in place to ensure this doesn't happen again and we continue to heavily monitor our processes accordingly.'

Sainsbury's

'We would never seek to mislead our customers. Due to human error the previous price of £2.59 was not included on the point of sale material for the sausages. Our buyers undergo regular training to help prevent this happening and we would like to apologise to our customers. There was a sign explaining the asparagus offer, so it was within the guidelines.'

“ TELL US WHAT YOU THINK Do you think special offers are a good deal? Or is it just a way for supermarkets to sell us more? Join the Conversation at www.which.co.uk/notspecial



WAITROSE

McCoy's Ridge Cut Cheddar & Onion Crisps (6x32g)
 In the four months this product was available it was almost always on multibuy at £1.79/£1.89 for one and £2.50 for two, or on discount at £1/£1.26 each. So whether you buy as a multibuy or 'on discount', the crisps essentially cost £1 or £1.25.

TESCO & SAINSBURY'S

Nestlé Munch Bunch Yogurt (4x100g)
 In 365 days this yogurt was generally either £1 on discount, or in a two-for-£2 multibuy (£1.40/£1.50/£1.59 for one). So whenever you buy, the product nearly always costs £1.

Are you hooked on supermarket multibuy? We've found these eye-catching offers don't always save you money - and could even cost you more

Exclusive Which? research has revealed that supermarket multibuy deals aren't always as good as you might be led to believe. When we analysed 115 popular products and trawled through around 300,000 prices, not only did we discover significantly more multibuy offers than last year, but we also found:

- Some multibuy offers didn't save you any money at all.
- Around 10% of products, on at least one occasion during the year, increased in price when they went onto multibuy and decreased afterwards. This could be from either a discount or standard price. Five examples that we found are pictured above.
- Overall, there often wasn't a lot of

difference between the multibuy price and the standard price.

■ Multibuy offers could be advertised with a date stating when the offer would end or a date you had to order by. But sometimes these were ignored and the offer period extended, so you might be tempted to stock up when there was no need.

Not all the examples we've highlighted were straightforward price rises, but we still think they could be misleading. Sometimes supermarkets yo-yo'd between multibuy and discounts - a discounted product increases in price as it goes onto multibuy and is then discounted afterwards. But this means that if you always take 'advantage' of the offer (multibuy or discount), the product nearly always costs the same. Some of the products we looked at did this for most of the year - rendering the normal price pretty redundant.



ASDA

Goodfella's Deep Pan Baked Pepperoni Pizza (419g)
For the six months it was available this generally cost £1 when not on multibuy. On multibuy, it increased in price to £2.50/£2.68 for one, or £4.50 for two. Even if you take 'advantage' of the offer, it's more than doubled in price.

ASDA

Garnier Ambre Solaire Moisturising Protection Milk SPF 20 (200ml)
It was usually £5 when not on multibuy, versus £7 for one or £10 for two when on multibuy. Generally, it was the same price whether on offer or not.

ASDA

Pampers Baby Wipes (64 pack)
These were mostly £1 when not on offer. On multibuy they were usually £2/£2.47 for one, £2/ £2.50 for two or £3 for three. It almost always worked out at £1 or £1.25 per item.

What the supermarkets say

We asked the supermarkets about these specific examples – all defended their use of promotions.

ASDA

'Customers tell us they want low prices, not a strategy that gives with one hand and takes with the other. We're making sure the cost of the weekly shop is consistently low, with no surprises.'

Sainsbury's

'We never seek to mislead our customers. We run a wide variety of promotions and always clearly display the price to help prevent any confusion.'

TESCO

'We work hard to offer our customers value for money, through low prices and price promotions including multibuy offers, which our customers tell us they like.'

Waitrose

'All our promotions offer genuine savings. The real price of this six-pack of McCoy's is £1.89, which we believe is good value – and, on top of this, all promotions have offered a significant discount.'

MULTIBUYS GONE MAD

With these sorts of tactics, it's hardly surprising that multibuy offers aren't particularly popular with shoppers – 73% of you told us that you prefer discounts to multibuy offers (see 'Our research', below).

But despite this, multibuy offers do appear to be on the increase. Across the supermarkets, the 115 products we looked at were on multibuy for 46% of the time in the first half of 2012, compared with 35% of the time in the first half of 2011. Previously, Asda had said its policy was to reduce its number of multibuy offers – which it has. However, when we asked if these items were on multibuy for longer, it admitted they were.

We also found some multibuy offers that were just daft. We went around supermarkets and found packets of sweets that were 34p each or four for £3. This 'offer' costs you an extra £1.64. We also found packs of four tins of Heinz soup for £2.99 next to individual tins on multibuy, at 80p each or four tins for £3. You can see the full gallery online at www.which.co.uk/multibuy – send any others you spot to ispyamultibuy@which.co.uk.

WHICH? SAYS

It's time supermarkets sorted out their pricing so that shoppers can easily spot the good deals from the bad. We've been calling on them to ensure offers really are special and save you as much as they appear to.

We have also been asking supermarkets to show clear and consistent unit pricing for all products, including those on promotion. We don't think you should have to carry a set of scales and a calculator to figure out whether a 99p bunch of bananas is better value than loose bananas priced at 68p per kg. Find out more at www.which.co.uk/unitprices.

OUR RESEARCH

We used 12 months of pricing data from the independent shopping website Mysupermarket.co.uk, to look at online supermarkets Asda, Ocado, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose. We excluded basics such as pasta and milk that are very rarely on offer, so our trolley was likely to contain more multibuy offers than the average shop. We also surveyed 1,045 members of the British public about multibuy offers in August 2012.



PACK OF 16
25% LESS
PACK OF 12

Birds Eye Original Beef Burgers with Onion

It was £3.98 before it shrank in size and £4.29 afterwards in Asda, Morrisons and Tesco.



250ml
24% LESS
190ml

Fry Light Extra Virgin Olive Oil Spray

Before it shrank, this cost £2.39 in Morrisons, Sainsbury's and Tesco. After it was £2.39 in Morrisons and Tesco and £2.30 in Sainsbury's.



300ml
17% LESS
250ml

Pledge Clean & Dust Furniture Polish Jasmine

In Morrisons this cost 98p on special offer or £1.30 full price before shrinking, and £1 on special offer or £1.30 afterwards.

PRODUCTS SHRINK PRICES DON'T

Which? uncovers a selection of everyday products that now offer poorer value for money than before

Big name brands are shrinking products by up to a quarter, but the prices aren't dropping. And in some cases, they've even increased.

We found a pack of Birds Eye beef burgers had four fewer burgers in it – now 12 instead of 16. We also discovered Pledge furniture polish had shrunk by 17%. But the prices had

stayed the same or risen. In fact, anything from bags of crisps to packs of dishwasher tablets are getting smaller.

We asked the makers of these products why they had shrunk them, and were generally told that, in the face of rising costs they chose to shrink products rather than increase prices. So we asked you what you wanted.

We found that 58% of you said you'd rather prices rose than packs got smaller. A further 37% would rather the pack shrank, but only if you were told. Only 3% said it was fine for the pack size to shrink and not be told about it.

Many of the manufacturers we spoke to said retailers ultimately set prices. We asked



500g
10% LESS
450g

Patak's Tikka Masala Cooking Sauce

This was £1.76 in Morrisons and Waitrose when it was 500g and it stayed the same when it was reduced to 450g.



525g
10% LESS
470g

Nestlé Shredded Wheat Superfruity Blue & Black

In Sainsbury's this was £2.68 at full price, or on offer at £2 before it shrank, and £2.68 after the pack contents were reduced.



40 WIPES
10% LESS
36 WIPES

Dettol Anti-Bacterial Cleansing Surface Wipes

Before it shrank, this pack was generally £2 in Asda and £1.80 in Ocado. It was £2 in both supermarkets afterwards.



Thorntons Mini Caramel Shortcakes

These were £1.40 in Waitrose when the pack contained 12 mini caramel shortcakes and £1.50 when it shrank to just 10.



Nestlé Munchies

These were £1.67 or two for £3 in Asda, £1.67 in Sainsbury's and £1.78 in Waitrose. They were £1.59 in all three afterwards, which isn't a proportionate price drop.



Bassetts Liquorice Allsorts

This pack was £1.70 in Asda, £1.48 in Sainsbury's and generally £1.48 in Morrisons. After it was £1.50 in Asda and stayed £1.48 in Sainsbury's and Morrisons.

whether they reduced the wholesale price or set a lower recommended retail price when the product shrank. Most manufacturers either said they didn't do this or wouldn't comment.

Nestlé said it had dropped the cost price but refused to say if it was proportionate to the amount its products shrank. Thorntons said shrinking allowed for better promotions.

If supermarkets aren't being charged less per item, it's not surprising that prices don't drop for consumers when products shrink.

JOIN OUR CAMPAIGN

When we asked you to send us details of shrinking products, we were inundated with

your responses. We then trawled through a year's worth of data, using independent shopping website Mysupermarket.co.uk, to find the exact details, as well as looking out for our own examples.

We think that this can be an underhand way of raising prices. That's why we are calling on supermarkets and government to make pricing clearer. We want simpler unit pricing so you can easily compare products to see which is the cheapest, and we want special

offers to be genuine. If you agree, sign up to our 'Price it right' campaign at www.which.co.uk/unitprice.

FOOTNOTE The prices given are for just before and just after the pack size shrank. We looked at examples between November 2011 and October 2012. We haven't listed prices from all supermarkets for these reasons: if the product didn't shrink in that supermarket during that time period (this could be because the smaller size was already stocked); the price immediately afterwards wasn't proportionately more; or the supermarket didn't stock the product. We also surveyed 1,257 Which? members in January 2013 about shrinking products.



JOIN THE CONVERSATION Would you rather a product shrank or the price increased? Do you think manufacturers should tell us? Go to www.whichconversation.co.uk/shrinking to have your say.



Dolmio Express Creamy Carbonara Pasta Sauce

Generally £2.34 in Sainsbury's, £2 in Ocado and £1.50 in Morrisons, it was then £2.34 in Ocado and Sainsbury's and £1.50 in Morrisons.



Finish All in 1 Powerball Dishwasher Tablets

These were £7.65 in Ocado before and after the pack size shrank from 28 to 26 tablets.



Walkers Cheese & Onion Crisps

These were 49p in Sainsbury's and 49p (or two for 90p) in Morrisons before shrinking. Both supermarkets charged the same after.

WHO'S THE CHEAPEST?

We've delved into the confusing world of supermarket price-matching schemes to find out exactly what is and isn't included in their comparisons



The voucher you're handed with your receipt says: 'Great news! We've compared prices with our rivals, and today you saved money by shopping here.' But what's the story behind that voucher?

Food prices are one of consumers' biggest worries, so supermarkets are keen to reassure you that you're getting a good deal, and encourage you to keep shopping with them. With the battle for your loyalty fiercer than ever, how much stock should you put in price-matching schemes?

DIFFERENT RULES

If you shop at Asda, Ocado, Sainsbury's or Tesco, you're probably familiar with the idea of price matching – where the supermarket gives you a voucher if your shopping would have been cheaper elsewhere. These four supermarkets all run schemes, but each one calculates whether a shopping trip is cheaper in different ways. There is also a variety

Price-matching schemes compared

	ASDA PRICE GUARANTEE	ocado LOW PRICE PROMISE	Sainsbury's BRAND MATCH	TESCO PRICE PROMISE
What do they compare?	Branded items and comparable own-brand items	Branded items and comparable own-brand items from Ocado or Essential Waitrose lines	Branded items only	Branded items and comparable own-brand items
What type of shops do they compare?	In-store and online	Online only	In-store only, but not convenience or Local stores	In-store and online, but not Express stores
Who do they compare with?	Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose	Tesco	Asda and Tesco	Asda, Morrisons and Sainsbury's
Do they include different-sized products?	YES Up to a 10% difference, and prices are adjusted to account for this	YES Up to a 50% difference. Prices are adjusted to account for size differences	YES Up to a 10% difference. Prices are adjusted to account for size differences, but this isn't mentioned in the T&Cs	YES Up to a 10% difference. Prices are not adjusted to account for size differences
How do you get a voucher?	Enter your receipt details online and print voucher. Vouchers are given if Asda is not 10% cheaper	Vouchers are automatically sent by email if Ocado is not the cheapest	Vouchers are automatically given at the till if Sainsbury's is not the cheapest	Vouchers are automatically given at the till or sent by email if Tesco is not the cheapest
Minimum spend/ minimum number of items	8 items	£40 - this is the minimum spend for any Ocado shop	£20	10 items
When do the vouchers expire?	28 days	14 days	14 days	28 days
What are the limits on vouchers?	£100 (max of 10 vouchers in a calendar month)	£10 per voucher	£10 per voucher	£10 per voucher, and £100 in a calendar month

of rules about when and how vouchers are distributed and how they can be used – you can see how each scheme differs above.

THEY CAN'T ALL BE CHEAPEST

Supermarkets each set their own rules for what is and isn't compared under price-matching schemes, and sometimes stock products in different sizes, so it can be hard to tell who's the cheapest overall.

We examined 59 different shopping trips made by ordinary shoppers, and found the 'cheapest' supermarket was often the one running the comparison. Asda was most often cheapest according to its own comparison; Tesco and Sainsbury's were cheapest half the time according to theirs.

We analysed 20 receipts for shopping trips made at Sainsbury's that were eligible for its 'Brand Match' scheme. Sainsbury's was cheaper than Asda and Tesco for 10 of these visits, and was joint-cheapest for another two, according to its calculations.

For Tesco, we also looked at 20 shopping trips that were eligible for its 'Price Promise'. Tesco was cheaper than Asda and Sainsbury's for 10 of these, according to its calculations.

Of the 19 Asda shops we examined, Asda was cheapest for 17, according to its 'Price Guarantee'.

All three schemes use different methods to measure who's cheapest, and they don't always include the same items. Sainsbury's only includes branded products, for example. And while Tesco and Asda both include own-brands as well as named brands in their price matches, they have differing opinions about what constitutes a comparable item, along with other rules that can lead an item to be included in one scheme but not the other.

When we queried why supermarkets often came out better in their own price-matching schemes, Asda said its Price Guarantee means it beats prices

and doesn't just match them. Sainsbury's told us it didn't want to comment on its competitors' schemes, but said: 'The principles on which Brand Match operates are very clear to customers.' Tesco said shoppers tend to buy items on promotion so you'd expect most baskets to be cheaper where they were bought, and that our findings were not consistent with its own research.

We weren't able to do a close analysis of Ocado's price-matching scheme as, unlike Asda, Sainsbury's and Tesco, it doesn't provide you with a breakdown of what was and wasn't included in your price match from the Ocado website. Whether Ocado says your shopping was cheaper at Ocado, or would have been cheaper at Tesco, is something that you can't double-check online.

Ocado told us that it will provide this breakdown on request to any customer who gets in contact. >

WAITROSE PRICE MATCHING

Waitrose's price-matching scheme is different to those of the other supermarkets. You don't get a voucher – instead, Waitrose promises that its prices on branded grocery products are identical to Tesco's.

However, this excludes promotions and special offers, so anything that's listed as 'half price', 'buy one get one free' or 'two for £4' at Tesco could be sold at the higher non-offer price in Waitrose. We asked Waitrose shoppers whether they thought special offers were included – a quarter of them incorrectly said yes, while two in five weren't sure. The majority of Waitrose shoppers therefore appear to be confused by its 'Brand Price Match' promise.

The Brand Price Match also excludes items that are stocked in slightly different sizes in Tesco. And price matching can also lead to cost increases for shoppers – if the price of an item rises in Tesco, it will also rise in Waitrose.

Waitrose told us that it makes it very clear that its commitment to match Tesco's branded prices doesn't include promotions, and that branded products with only slight differences in size are fairly rare.

ROOM TO IMPROVE

When we surveyed more than 1,900 shoppers about price-matching schemes, the majority thought they understood how they worked, and saw them as a good thing.

Most shoppers told us they typically redeem the price-match vouchers they get, but for those that rarely or never redeem them, the most common reasons are that they forget about them, or the vouchers expire before they can use them.

Sainsbury's and Ocado vouchers expire quickest, in 14 days, compared with 28 days for Asda and Tesco. We asked Sainsbury's and Ocado why their vouchers weren't valid for as long. Ocado said that this was because the majority of its customers shop weekly or fortnightly, and that most vouchers are redeemed within a couple of days. Sainsbury's said that 14 days gave customers ample time to redeem them.

The problem of vouchers expiring could be avoided if supermarkets applied the discounts immediately – and three quarters of shoppers told us they would prefer this. So we asked supermarkets whether they would consider giving instant discounts. Ocado said it couldn't comment on 'future pricing initiatives',



while Sainsbury's told us that it already does 'the hard work for customers by giving them an instant coupon at the till'.

Tesco said it uses vouchers because it wants to 'make it up to customers in a way that they notice' when their shopping would have been cheaper elsewhere.

Asda said that when it asked its customers if they wanted the Asda Price Guarantee at the checkout, they said no.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY: ALAMY, FULLSTOP PHOTOGRAPHY

Spotlight on price claims

None of the 'big four' – Asda, Morrisons, Sainsbury's and Tesco – wants to be seen as more expensive than its rivals, so ads that give that impression are contentious. Here are three of the most recent complaints supermarkets have made to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) regarding each other's price-matching ads

SAINSBURY'S vs TESCO July 2013

Sainsbury's challenged a Tesco Price Promise advert on the basis that some of the products included in the ad were not comparable, because factors such as the country of origin of ingredients and animal welfare hadn't been taken into account. The ASA ruled in Tesco's favour, saying that the products met the 'same need' and were intended for the same purpose.

Sainsbury's responded with an ad showing two bananas – one from Sainsbury's, which is Fairtrade, and one from Tesco which is not – and the slogan

'Same price, different values'. Sainsbury's is currently appealing the ASA's verdict.

TESCO vs SAINSBURY'S October 2012

Tesco objected to a series of Sainsbury's adverts, saying that its claims that 'you won't pay more for brands than at Asda or Tesco' were misleading, because customers would still sometimes pay more – although they'd get a Sainsbury's Brand Match voucher to offset the cost.

The ASA upheld this complaint, but rejected another from Tesco that said the ads

didn't make it clear enough that not all branded items would be included in the Sainsbury's Brand Match scheme.

TESCO vs ASDA March 2012

Tesco challenged an Asda ad that said 'Only one supermarket is... always 10% cheaper or we'll give you the difference – guaranteed' on the basis that Asda isn't always cheaper. Asda said the ad clearly referred to the Asda Price Guarantee and didn't imply that Asda would always be cheaper, but the ASA upheld the complaint in favour of Tesco.

What's excluded?

Different-sized packs can mean that products are dropped from price-matching schemes. And we were left puzzled by the absence of some other items

DIFFERENT PACK SIZES

Well-known branded items aren't always included in price matches, as supermarkets sometimes stock them in different-sized packs – although the difference can be so small that only the most observant shopper would spot it.

Asda and Tesco allow for this in their price matches by

including products that are different in size by up to 10%. Sainsbury's said that in most cases it also includes items that are different by up to 10%, as long as they are able to find a match. But even allowing for a 10% difference, there are still some similarly sized items excluded – below are examples of some that we discovered.



L'Oréal Elvive: 400ml in Sainsbury's and Tesco; 500ml in Asda. Excluded by Asda, Sainsbury's and Tesco



Finish Powerball Lemon Dishwasher Tablets: 18 tabs in Sainsbury's, 13 tabs in Asda



Bold 2in1 Lavender & Camomile Liquid tabs: 33 tabs in Asda and Tesco, 40 tabs in Sainsbury's



McVitie's Milk Chocolate Digestives weren't included in the Tesco comparison with Sainsbury's



An eight pack of Toffee Crisp bars wasn't included in the Sainsbury's comparison with Tesco

OTHER EXCLUSIONS

As well as similarly sized products, we came across other items that were excluded for reasons we couldn't understand.

You'll find McVitie's Milk Chocolate Digestives in every supermarket, but when one of our shoppers bought them from Tesco, they weren't included in the Tesco Price Promise comparison with Sainsbury's.

Tesco said the pack size had changed in Sainsbury's since the match was first made, so it was a not counted as a comparable match.

And a pack of eight Toffee Crisp chocolate bars wasn't

compared with Tesco by Sainsbury's. Sainsbury's said this was due to a technical error that has since been rectified.

Asda matches comparable own-brand items. But we found Asda Smartprice Fish Fingers weren't compared with the Sainsbury's Basics equivalent. Asda said the two products were listed in different ways, but this has now been changed so that they can be matched.

And Asda chopped tomatoes weren't compared with the Sainsbury's version. Asda said one of these items was incorrectly listed as a tin instead of a carton, but this has been corrected.

YOUR VIEWS

“ I find money-off vouchers attractive. Tesco's system has improved greatly as it's now all done for you. Asda makes you enter your receipt details online and then print off a coupon, which is not as easy.'
ROSEMARY DIXON, LEICESTERSHIRE

“ I'm in favour of price matching because I don't have to check price comparison sites to find the best deal, and I don't have to shop at different supermarkets to pick up the best buys. I like that Tesco's scheme applies to own-label items, including the 'Everyday Value' range, as well as big brands, so matches what I buy better than the schemes that only match on big brands.'
SB, LONDON

“ I shop at Tesco because it's my nearest large supermarket, so even if my shopping is slightly cheaper elsewhere, I'm still going to keep shopping there.'
PETER JONES, SUFFOLK

“ I think the Ocado scheme is great. It's done automatically for me without any hassle on my part at all.'
KAT PATRICK, OXFORDSHIRE

“ I've received vouchers from Sainsbury's and Tesco, but I still double-check prices prior to making a purchase, as I do not believe that the price-matching schemes always work in the customer's favour.'
NICK BESTWICK, KENT

“ Tesco requires you to buy a minimum of 10 different items, and Sainsbury's requires a minimum spend of £20. If some items are on multibuy, you might not realise you've spent less than this.'
BERYL FOOTE, BASINGSTOKE

“ I like getting money-off vouchers or finding out how much I've saved by shopping at Sainsbury's – in effect I can't lose out by shopping there.'
ARTHUR HARVEY, HAMPSHIRE

EXPERT VIEW

Making the most of price matching

Matt Clear | Which? shopping expert



Most of us think that price-matching schemes are a good thing, allowing you to shave a little bit off the cost of your weekly shop.

But we believe you should take them with a pinch of salt, and not allow them to influence where you shop too much.

Our research shows that there are a lot of different ways to measure that. And there will inevitably be items excluded, which limits how meaningful the comparisons are.

These vouchers benefit supermarkets by giving you a reason to return – usually at little cost to them. For the 59 shopping trips we analysed, the vouchers our shoppers received offered an average discount of £1.45. Worth using if you're planning to visit that supermarket anyway, but too small to make it worth a special trip. Our best advice is still to shop around, and explore trading down to cheaper ranges – own-labels often come out on top against well-known brands in Which? taste tests.

Tell us your views on supermarket price-matching schemes and your best tips to save money on grocery shopping at www.which.co.uk/pricematch.



'On offer for four times as long as it was at the higher price'



'Multibuy costs £1 more'



'Multibuy saves you nothing'



'At the higher price for just three days'

Special offers under scrutiny

We name the supermarkets that are still selling products with dodgy discounts and misleading multibuy, despite the government's attempt to clarify its guidelines on food-and-drink offers

At Which?, we've spent the last five years investigating the tricks that supermarkets use to tempt you to buy, uncovering dozens of examples of dodgy pricing along the way.

This year we provided the evidence that Birmingham Trading Standards used in its court case against Tesco, where the supermarket was fined £300,000 for a misleading special offer (see October, p4). And in November last year the government attempted to clarify the rules about food-and-drink offers, in a bid to get supermarkets to play fair. Eight supermarkets signed up to the new rules.

Overall the guidance says that special offers shouldn't be misleading, and any higher price referred to should be a genuine price. Products also shouldn't be on offer for longer than they are at the higher price. But these rules are caveated: they say that what's reasonable depends on the circumstances. In other cases, putting up a sign that explains how the offer differs from these rules could be enough.

SHOCKING SPECIAL OFFERS

To find out whether the supermarkets are still pulling the wool over our eyes, we analysed more than 70,000 grocery prices. From this research we can reveal that supermarkets are still using special offers that make it look like you're getting a bargain when you're not.

Our latest investigation has found products that were sold at the higher price for a short time before being discounted for weeks. We paid special attention to products where the offers lasted longer than the item was sold at the higher price – as this can break the rules – and found numerous examples. The problem with these kinds of offers is that the offer price can effectively become the 'normal' price rather than a special one.

We also uncovered misleading multibuy, where the offer didn't save you any money, or

the products actually cost more on multibuy. Examples of dubious special offers we found:

- Ocado sold a 12 pack of Beck's Bier on offer as 'was £12.19 now £9' for almost a month, but had only sold it at £12.19 for three days, 18 days before the offer started.

- Sainsbury's sold Carex Aloe Vera & Eucalyptus Moisturising Antibacterial Handwash (250ml) at a higher price of £1.80 for seven days, and then on offer at 'was £1.80 now 90p' for 84 days.

- Asda increased the regular price of Uncle Ben's rice from £1 to £1.58 as it went onto a '2 for £3' multibuy, then returned it to £1 when the multibuy ended – making it more expensive when it was on offer than when it wasn't.

- Ocado increased the price of Waitrose blueberries to £3.99 for a week, before selling them on offer at £2.66 for over a month.

- Tesco sold Radox Bath Therapy Stress Relief with Rosemary at £1.90 for 22 days, then on offer at 95p for 53 days.

Overall, around 10% of items we looked at had been in an offer where the discount lasted longer than the previous higher price. However, these varied from only being a few days out to the more extreme examples we've pulled out in the table on p18.

Products that increased in price as they went onto multibuy were less common, but we still found them – see the examples below. More common were prices that yo-yo'd between multibuy and discounts. This still meant the item increased in price as it went onto multibuy and decreased as it came off – just to and from the discounted price. This appears to make the 'was' price rather academic, and casts serious doubt on the claimed multibuy savings. >

MISLEADING MULTIBUYS

ASDA					
PRODUCT					
PRICE BEFORE MULTIBUY	£1	£2	£1	£1.50	£5
PRICE DURING MULTIBUY	£1.80 and 2 for £2	£2.78 and 2 for £5	£1.58 and 2 for £3	£2.18 and 2 for £4	£7 and 2 for £10
LOOKS LIKE IT SAVES YOU	£1.60	56p	16p	36p	£4
ACTUAL SAVING	None	Costs £1 more	Costs £1 more	Costs £1 more	None

WHAT YOU THINK

We asked shoppers for their views of special offers and found that they continue to have an impact on how most of us shop – so it’s crucial they offer genuine savings. Eight in 10 people look out for offers in supermarkets, with most saying that they help them to make the most of their budget. However, two fifths believe that offers encourage them to buy products they don’t really need, and three

products, but actually you had to buy two or more of the same.

If you see an example of a dodgy special offer, send us an email, and preferably a photo, to helpwanted@which.co.uk.

BREAKING THE RULES

We believe all the offers we’ve pulled out (see table below for more examples) offer consumers a bad deal and could make

With consumers hit hard by rising food prices, it’s unacceptable that we’re still finding problems with special offers. If we don’t see swift changes, we will consider further action to tackle this poor practice

in 10 have regretted buying products that they only bought because they were on offer.

We also asked about items that you thought were on offer but later found weren’t, after readers contacted us about this issue. Around four in 10 people have mistakenly chosen a product that they thought was part of an offer but actually wasn’t. Half said it was because it was next to a similar product that was on offer. A third thought the product was part of a multibuy that allowed you to buy different

you think you’re saving more money than you actually are.

And in some cases we think they could be breaking government guidance on special offers and, in turn, potentially breaking the law. This applies to certain items where the offer ran for much longer than the product was sold at the higher price. However, because government guidance is still vague, the supermarkets can sometimes argue that they are complying, even when we think an offer

is dodgy. See our Expert View (opposite) for more about the government guidance.

WHICH? SAYS

With consumers hit hard by rising food prices, it’s unacceptable that we’re still finding problems with special offers. The supermarkets’ pricing systems are so confusing that it’s hard for consumers to tell if they’re getting a good deal.

The government, supermarkets and the OFT urgently need to ensure that the special offers guidance is updated and enforced with more explicit rules about multibuy. If these changes are not made swiftly, then we will consider using our formal legal powers to ensure this poor practice is tackled.

We want supermarkets to change how they use special offers and to make sure that they always are ‘special’. So if you’re fed up with trying to figure out whether discounts are the real deal, or downright dodgy, support our campaign at www.which.co.uk/offers and tell us who you shop with.

In the meantime, when you’re shopping in supermarkets, we suggest you treat special offers with a healthy dose of scepticism – especially when multibuy encourages you to buy more than you might otherwise need.

SUPERMARKET DODGY DISCOUNTS

	OCADO			MORRISONS	SAINSBURY'S	
PRODUCT	 Beck's Bier (12 x 275ml)	 Essential Waitrose Blueberries (150g)	 Essential Waitrose English Strawberries (400g)	 Chicago Town Deep Dish Pizzas (2 pack, 340g)	 Carex Moisturising Antibacterial Handwash (250ml)	 Finish All in 1 Powerball Dishwasher Tablets (39)
WAS PRICE	£12.19	£3.99	£4.99 (on 2 for 1 deal)	£2	£1.80	£10.50
OFFER PRICE	£9	£2.66	£2.49 or £2	£1.33	90p	£5 or 4.72
DAYS AT HIGHER PRICE	3	7	15	14	7	14
DAYS ON OFFER	27	39	37	28	84	56

What the supermarkets say

We challenged the supermarkets to respond to our findings, and they said:

ASDA

'We take pricing seriously, and we've recently employed a new team within the business that looks at all aspects of our pricing process and pricing practices in store and online. Sometimes mistakes can happen, but we would never deliberately mislead our customers – our aim is always to offer the lowest prices for the longest.'

TESCO

'Once the new guidelines were introduced it was agreed that there would be a transition period – the examples highlighted here fell within that grace period. We are one of eight supermarkets who have signed up to the code. We have worked incredibly hard to train our staff and introduce new procedures to ensure that we can comply, and we believe we're now leading the industry in compliance.'

OCADO

'At any one time we have several thousand promotions which require an element of

human interaction. This can, in isolated incidents, lead to human error. We are investigating the price history of these products, but would never try to mislead our customers in any way. We are making continuous improvements, but believe that we generally get it right.'

SAINSBURY'S

'We sincerely apologise to our customers; with 50,000 products we occasionally make mistakes, such as on these three items. We are absolutely committed to fair and transparent promotions and carry out regular audits and thorough training on this.'

MORRISONS

'The product [pizza] was sold at the higher price for 18 out of the previous 22 weeks leading up to the promotion. This shows that the higher price was the 'normal' price, which is why we disagree with your conclusions and believe that this promotion complied with the OFT principles.'

EXPERT VIEW

Explaining the rules

Peter McCarthy | Which? Senior Lawyer



There is a law that is meant to ensure companies don't mislead us, called the Consumer Protection from

Unfair Trading Regulations. But this law sets out broad principles, rather than clear detail about what supermarkets can and can't do, which is why the government produced a guide about sales and special offers. However, the principles are caveated, saying what is reasonable depends on the circumstances.

Last year, the government attempted to make the rules for supermarkets clearer with more guidance. But, in some cases, the new and original guidance don't cover the same issues, causing confusion (it's unclear, for instance, whether supermarkets can cover themselves by having a sign that explains how long items were sold at the higher price). And there are still no real rules around multibuy, even though our research shows they can be unclear or misleading.

The upshot of all this is that the supermarkets have quite a bit of room for manoeuvre, and can sometimes argue that offers are compliant even when we think they don't stack up. As the recent Tesco case shows, ultimately it's for the courts to decide.

We looked at how long products were sold at the higher price compared with how long they were on offer to reveal dodgy discounts

TESCO				
Tilda Steamed Basmati Rice (250g)	Flash All Purpose Cleaning Spray Lemon (500ml)	Warburtons Gluten & Wheat Free White Rolls (three)	Radox Bath Therapy Stress Relief with Rosemary (500ml)	
£1.59 (or 2 for £2.50)	£2	£1.98	£1.90	
£1	£1	£1.50	95p	
21	17	20	22	
56	47	51	53	

Our research

To investigate dodgy deals, we analysed at least six months' worth of pricing data (mainly 1 January to 30 June 2013) from independent shopping website MySupermarket.co.uk. We looked at 75 products across five supermarkets – not all were available in every supermarket. We've selected a snapshot of examples that illustrate different pricing problems within this period. We also surveyed 1,906 UK residents, online in August 2013.

News

THIS MONTH

- 06 Data roaming**
Cut the cost of using mobiles abroad
- 07 'Drinkable sunscreen'**
Why the claims are hard to swallow
- 08 Elderly care**
Five things you should know
- 09 Fixed-rate Isas**
Banks issue top-up deadlines

Do you have a story for us to investigate? Email us at news@which.co.uk

SHOPPING

Which? uncovers more dodgy supermarket special offers

The supermarkets are still getting it wrong, and we're working to stop them

A new Which? investigation into supermarkets has uncovered products 'on offer' for much longer than they were sold at the higher price.

Some of these could potentially be breaking government guidance. We've also found multibuy offers that don't save you money. We've shown the Trading Standards Institute why we think the current rules don't work, and it's announced that new rules are needed. We'll be working to make these rules better as it develops them and as we continue our campaign to Make Special Offers Special.

Dodgy special offers

■ Asda increased the price of a Chicago Town Four Cheese Pizza Two-Pack from £1.50 to £2 as it went onto multibuy at two for £3. It went back to £1.50 as the 'offer' ended.

■ Ocado sold the same pizzas at the higher price of £2.19 for eight days and then on offer for 27 days at £1.64.

■ Asda sold Andrex Bold and Bright Toilet Rolls for 49 days at the higher price of £2.24, and then on offer for 81 days at 'was £2.24 now £2'.

■ Sainsbury's sold Carex Anti-Bacterial Handwash with Silver (250ml) for 10 days at the higher price of £1.60, and then 'was £1.60 now £1' for 28 days.

■ In Scotland, Tesco sold Budweiser (4x440ml) as 'was £4.50 now £4' for 21 days. It was sold at the higher price for 15 days, 41 days before the offer started.

We used data from the independent shopping website mysupermarket.co.uk to find these offers.

➔ **Fed up with dodgy discounts and misleading multibuy offers? Support our campaign at which.co.uk/offers**



AT ASDA, THIS MULLER YOGURT COST MORE WHEN IT WAS ON MULTIBUY

How the supermarkets responded

Sainsbury's

'In February Carex was mistakenly priced at £1.50 for three weeks and this was corrected to £1.60. It's been discounted to £1 twice since the start of the year, for three weeks in March and two weeks in April.'

Ocado

'We run thousands of offers each week and regrettably errors are sometimes made. This offer was available in October 2013 and we have since changed our processes to improve price monitoring and ensure we follow the government guidelines.'

ASDA

'We would never deliberately mislead our customers. Our aim is to simply have the lowest prices for the longest.'

TESCO

'We are absolutely committed to ensuring that all our promotions offer genuinely good value. We apologise for this labelling error, and have since introduced new systems to prevent it happening again.'

For daily consumer news, visit which.co.uk/news

DATA ROAMING

Avoid high mobile bills when abroad

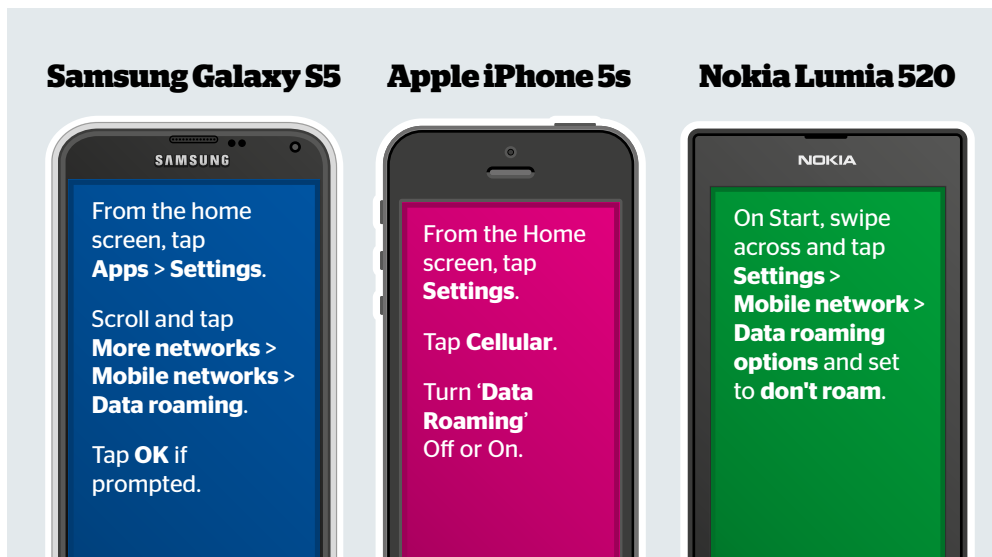
Turn off data roaming on your phone to avoid an unexpected high bill

Do you know how to turn off data roaming on your phone? Data roaming lets your phone connect to the internet with another provider when abroad – and can be pricey.

One in six people who have used their phone abroad have been shocked by a high bill, a Which? survey revealed. Of these, one in four were charged more than £40 above

their usual monthly usage. Don't get caught out – simply switch off your data roaming when abroad.

Our survey revealed that the top three handset brands owned by UK consumers are Samsung (34%), Nokia (20%) and Apple (16%). So we've put together a quick guide (left) that shows you how to switch off data roaming on the most popular handset from each manufacturer. These instructions are also likely to apply to other handsets, but ask your phone provider for help if you're unsure.



Tips on keeping bills low

The European Commission continued to lower caps on roaming charges from 1 July 2014, and is working towards scrapping EU roaming charges in 2015. In the meantime – or when travelling outside the EU – curb data charges by looking for free wi-fi access spots. If you're using an unsecured network, be careful not to reveal passwords and personal information, though.

If you will be using your phone a lot, it may be worth buying a local Sim card (if you have an unlocked phone).

➔ **For advice on challenging excessive mobile bills, go to which.co.uk/mobilephonebills.**

Misleading financial ads on the up

The number of successful complaints about financial companies' adverts has shot up by 80% over four years, *Which? Money* has found.

Last year the Advertising Standards Authority upheld 33 complaints, compared with 18 in 2010. The ASA has already upheld 18 complaints in the first six months of 2014.

Loan companies were the worst offenders, accounting for 25% of the successful complaints. Wonga alone had four complaints upheld against it, including one against an advert featuring puppets, which was judged to have created confusion as to the interest rates that would apply to a loan.

Household banking names have also felt the regulator's wrath. Lloyds, NatWest and Royal Bank of Scotland had complaints over TV advertising upheld, and Barclays was rapped for an ATM receipt advert.

Read our investigation into the psychology behind financial marketing on p43.

Parking 'spy cars' banned

We tipped you off about imminent changes to parking laws in our May issue (May 2014, p7). The government has since announced new parking measures, including a ban on the use of CCTV-equipped 'spy cars' to enforce on-street parking tickets. New regulations mean tickets will need to be fixed to a windscreen by traffic wardens.

Worst offenders

(Percentages are of all successful complaints)

Loans companies

25%

Insurance firms

19%

PPI claims firms

10%



Don't miss out on Green Deal cash

You could receive up to £7,600 by making your home more energy efficient - with a new boiler, for example - so apply for the Green Deal Home Improvement Fund. £25m has already been claimed, and payments might decrease after £50m. Visit which.co.uk/greendeal.



Insurers sting drivers over admin

Drivers have faced car insurance administration fee hikes of up to 200% over three years, new *Which? Money* research has found.

Since 2011, *Which? Money* has tracked the fees that 28 insurers charge for altering or cancelling policies. Out of these, 13 raised their fees and eight introduced new ones – the highest additions were from The AA, Allianz and Hastings Direct.

Cancellation fees have gone up by almost a fifth (19%) on average, but Endsleigh's fee has gone up by 200% from £25 to £75. Hastings Direct charges the most for mid-term policy adjustments, up to £35. Nine of the 28 insurers charge adjustments fees that are half or less than this.

Only Age UK has no additional charges, while out of those insurers that charge customers for paying by monthly installments, NFU Mutual's interest rate (2.75% APR) is the lowest.

For full tables of car insurance fees and charges, see which.co.uk/insurancefees.

HEALTH

Is 'world's first drinkable sunscreen' nonsense?

Which? goes behind the marketing claims to reveal that the product is actually water

A product that has been publicised in the British media as the 'world's first drinkable sunscreen' is 100% water. Harmonized H₂O UV Protection costs £25 for a 100ml bottle and its makers claim that it works thanks to 'vibrational waves'.

These waves are said to neutralise UVA and UVB, the types of UV radiation associated with skin cancer. The product claims to offer protection equivalent to an SPF30 sunscreen.

If you think that sounds dubious, you'll be interested to hear that the British Association of Dermatologists agrees, saying 'it's complete nonsense to suggest that drinking water will give you a sun protection factor of 30'. It advises people not to rely on 'unproven methods' and to continue to protect their skin using traditional sunscreens, clothing and shade.

Which? contacted the maker of Harmonized H₂O, which said it had results of a clinical trial, but couldn't share these in time for print.

➤ **Until real evidence is published that products like this work, we recommend sticking to proven sunscreens such as the 12 that passed our SPF and UVA tests. See *Which?*, June 2014, p62, or go to which.co.uk/sunscreens.**



'Ingredients: Distilled Water, Multiple Vibrational Frequency Blends'

Save money on parking at Heathrow

Short-stay parking at Heathrow can be more than £22 cheaper than the official meet-and-greet service, *Which?* has discovered, with your car parked just as conveniently and no need to give your keys to someone else.

At T1 and T2, short-stay parking is £99.70 for a week - £4.50 cheaper than meet-and-greet. At T4 (£97.90) it's £6.30 cheaper, while at T5 (£114.90) it's £22.60 cheaper.



Delayed Npower bills written off

Npower customers who closed their accounts before December 2013 will not be asked to pay their energy bill if it hasn't already been sent out. While this may be a relief for some ex-customers, those who have already received bills will still have to pay. Ofgem is currently investigating Npower, and has told the supplier it will face penalties unless it deals with its backlog of bills within strict deadlines.

AT A GLANCE

- Find out which big-brand products have shrunk without dropping in price
- We ask the brands why this is happening
- Discover our budget supermarket Best Buys to help you save



Shrinking products and sneaky price rises

Have you ever wondered why some products seem to be shrinking, but their prices aren't always dropping? Our investigation reveals that this might not be as mysterious as you think

When Alice picked up a potion that said 'Drink me', she wasn't expecting that she would end up only 10 inches tall. Likewise, when you are in the supermarket picking up a packet of vegetables or a box of laundry powder, you're not expecting it to be an inch shorter or 100g lighter than last week.

But that's exactly what we've found to be the case. Products are losing 50g here and a few centimetres there, which is all adding up to a more expensive shop without you knowing why.

The papers have been awash with the news that Cadbury Creme Eggs will now come in boxes of five rather than six. However, because of the many examples you'd sent us we knew this wasn't just an issue about Creme Eggs. To investigate further, we used data from independent shopping website Mysupermarket.co.uk to find out more

about the products you told us had shrunk, as well as exploring some examples of our own. We looked at examples from both 2013 and 2014.

We also asked the manufacturers why the products shrank. The majority told us that shops ultimately set the prices, which is true – but unless the manufacturers drop their wholesale prices (what they charge the supermarkets), it's not surprising that the supermarkets don't charge less. Where manufacturers didn't answer our questions about whether they'd dropped the wholesale prices, or they said that they had actually dropped prices, we asked the supermarkets for their take on things.

If, like us, you're fed up with products that are shrinking without there being a drop in price, help us to uncover more examples. Let us know what you've seen by emailing helpwanted@which.co.uk.

SMALLER PRODUCTS FOR THE SAME PRICE – OR MORE

We looked at the prices of these products just before and after they shrank and found that you were still paying the same price or, in some cases, even more



Surf with Essential Oils powder Tropical Lily & Ylang Ylang

Size before: 25 washes (2kg)

Size after: 23 washes (1.61kg)*

This was £5 in Ocado and Tesco before and after it shrank. Unilever said the RRP dropped proportionately, but couldn't reveal its supermarket charges. Tesco said its pricing was 'clear' and 'affordable', and Ocado said its price matches Tesco.

* Dosage per wash also changed



Cif Actifizz Multi-Purpose Lemon spray

Size before: 750ml Size after: 700ml

This was £2 in Asda before and after it shrank. Unilever said it dropped the recommended retail price (RRP) a proportionate amount, but that the answer to whether it charged supermarkets less was confidential. Asda said it was charged the same by Unilever.



Domestos Spray Bleach Multipurpose Cleaner

Size before: 750ml Size after: 700ml

This bottle of Domestos was £3 in Asda before and after it shrank. As with the Cif spray, Unilever said that it dropped the RRP proportionately, but that what it charges supermarkets is confidential. And, once again, Asda said it was charged the same wholesale price.



Birds Eye Select Mixed Vegetables

Size before: 750g Size after: 690g

These vegetables cost £2 before and after they shrank, in Asda, Morrisons and Sainsbury's (there were multibuy offers both before and after the pack shrank in the different supermarkets – we've given the non-offer price). Birds Eye told us it sometimes reduces pack sizes to keep costs down and, in this case, to introduce zip-lock packaging – something it said the majority of people wanted.



Philadelphia Light Soft Cheese

Size before: 200g Size after: 180g

This product cost £1.84 in Asda before it shrank and £1.87 after. It was £1.85 in Sainsbury's before it shrank and £1 in Morrisons (on promotion, down from £1.85) – both these prices stayed the same for the smaller pack. Philadelphia said it hadn't dropped the price when it shrank because of economic factors, and that it also changed the recipe to one that proved popular in tests.

Tetley Blend of Both tea bags

Size before: 80 Size after: 75

These packs actually increased in price as they shrank, costing £2.55 in Sainsbury's before and £2.75 after losing five tea bags. Tetley said that what it charges supermarkets is confidential. Sainsbury's said the product is regularly on offer at £2 and didn't comment on wholesale prices.



Aunt Bessie's Homestyle Chips

Size before: 750g Size after: 700g

These chips were £1.65 in Asda before and after they shrank in 2013. We were unable to get a response from Aunt Bessie's, but Asda told us it was charged the same wholesale price.

Hovis Best of Both

Size before: 800g Size after: 750g

In Asda, Morrisons and Sainsbury's, this loaf was £1.35 before and after it shrank (not including multibuys in 2013). Hovis said it improved the recipe and health benefits and that it has the same number of slices. It didn't answer about wholesale prices or RRP's. Asda said it was charged the same, Sainsbury's said this loaf was now £1, and Morrisons said Hovis had changed the recipe.

The prices we've given are for just before and after the pack shrank and are example prices, not from all supermarkets, as they depend on both sizes being stocked, for instance. Most examples are from 2014.

PRICES DROPPED, BUT WEIGHT DROPPED FURTHER

We looked at the prices of these products just before and after they shrank, and they all cost more per 100g after shrinkage

Whiskas Adult Complete Duck & Turkey

Size before: 375g Size after: 340g

This cost £1.28 in Asda before it shrank and £1.19 after. However, Whiskas said that it had dropped the price of this product by a proportionate amount. When we asked Asda why it was selling it for more per 100g, it said the price reflected what it was charged by Whiskas – so there's no clear answer as to why it cost more.



Alpen Original Muesli

Size before: 1.5kg

Size after: 1.3kg

Asda sold this for £4.28 and Morrisons and Sainsbury's for £4.29. After shrinking, it was £3.97, £3.99 and £4 respectively – all more per 100g. Alpen said it dropped the RRP to below £4 and that offers meant the price per gram was lower. It wouldn't comment on wholesale prices. Morrisons and Sainsbury's also didn't comment on wholesale prices, but Asda said it was charged more per 100g.

Ambrosia Chocolate Flavour Custard

Size before: 150g Size after: 120g

This custard was 45p in Asda and 53p in Waitrose before it shrank, and remained the same price in Asda and went down to 48p in Waitrose afterwards (not including multibuy). This wasn't a proportionate drop. Ambrosia said it dropped the price from 53p to 48p, but not as much as it shrank, as manufacturing costs were the same.



Whiskas Fisherman's Choice in Jelly pouches

Size before: 48x100g

Size after: 40x100g

This cost £10 (was £13.99) in Ocado before it shrank and then £11.99 after. Even if you ignore the offer it was still more per 100g. Whiskas said that it had dropped the price, but because of rising costs it wasn't able to bring it in line with the weight reduction.



EXPERT VIEW

PREMIUM vs BUDGET

Alice Rickman, Which? supermarkets expert



Manufacturers generally have to put a weight on the pack. But unless, like us, you've recorded pack sizes

over time, this isn't going to tell you whether the product has shrunk. So is there anything you can do?

Put simply, there are no easy wins. Unit prices give the price per gram or ml so you can generally tell what is cheapest. This is important, as a 90g pack can be made to look the same size as a 100g pack. Unfortunately unit prices

aren't always consistent, so we're campaigning to fix this. It's also worth knowing where you can cut corners. When we compared standard, budget and premium foods last year, we found that standard and even some budget foods often fared well, especially for everyday cooking.

If you have the luxury of time, varying what you buy

at different supermarkets can help. For example, some of you have told us about using Aldi or Lidl for top-up shopping.

Our monthly supermarket comparison basket, at which.co.uk/shopping-basket, also compares the price of 80 to 100 branded items each month in the online supermarkets Asda, Morrisons, Ocado,

Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose. Asda has come out cheapest in this for the last year.

While this is just a snapshot of products, you could save money using a cheaper supermarket to bulk buy non-perishable branded goods and then visit your favourite for own-brand and fresh produce.



Jordans Crunchy Oat Granola Raisin & Almond

Size before: 1kg Size after: 850g

This was sold for £2.99 in Sainsbury's and £3.29 in Morrisons. Afterwards it was £2.99 in both, which is more per 100g. Jordans said it reduced the price to £2.99, but said it had to take account of increased costs, and it also introduced zip-lock packaging.

Cheap supermarket Best Buys

To help you get the best value on your shopping, look out for these keenly priced Best Buys



Sainsbury's Blanc de Blancs Brut Champagne £20
750ml **80%**

Our experts described it as 'well made, with a stylish balance of acidity and sweetness'.

Aldi Almat Biological Liquid Capsules £2.89
20 washes **73%**

These liquid capsules are good at tackling most stains, including blood, mud and grass, although less effective at removing make-up marks than our other Best Buy capsules.



Aldi Magnum Premium 79p 500ml 89%

One bottle of this can clean up to 11,750 dirty plates, so this is a great-value product that should last a long time.



Morrisons M English Breakfast £1.85
100 tea bags **80%**

Our experts described this as a full-bodied, well-rounded tea with a pleasant, lingering aftertaste, as well as a clean, strong flavour.



Sainsbury's All in One dishwasher tablets £4
30 tablets **80%**

These came top in last month's dishwasher tablets test, and cost just 13p per wash. Aldi's Magnum All in One tablets came second and are even cheaper, at 10p per wash.



Lidl Heavenly Butter 89p 500g 70%

This spread was the second-tastiest product we tested (after Clover) and panellists rated its texture highly.



THE BOTTOM LINE

We understand that rising costs mean that products sometimes become more expensive, but we think manufacturers should be transparent with shoppers. So instead of sneaky price hikes resulting from dropping the quantity, we think they should just increase the price, or tell shoppers clearly on the pack when something has shrunk. We know that sometimes manufacturers use it as a way to fund improving recipes or packaging, but we still think you're entitled to the full story so that you can make an informed decision. If you want to save money, look at the unit price, not the actual price or the size of the pack.



FIND OUT MORE

On Which.co.uk

See our monthly supermarket comparison basket at which.co.uk/shoppingbasket

Join the conversation

How do you feel about the shrinking boxes of Cadbury Creme Eggs? You can let us know your views on shrinking products at which.co.uk/shrinkage

Recent supermarket articles in Which?

- 'Budget vs premium', October 2014, p20
- '10 pricing tactics to watch out for in supermarkets', March 2014, p24
- 'Products shrink, prices don't', April 2013, p20

Other useful contacts

Compare prices at mysupermarket.co.uk – you can also do your shopping through the site.