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How much meat  
do these contain?  
What else is in them?  
How do I know if  
they're good value?

# THE TRUE COST OF **CHEAP MEAT**

A closer look at labels on popular supermarket meat products reveals that cheaper sausages aren't as good value as you may think, and some branded ones are overpriced and best avoided

**Y**ou might think that the best-value sausages and burgers in a supermarket would be those in the value range. But Which? research reveals that when you work out how much you pay for just the meat (not considering the cost of fillers, such as water, fat and rind), the cheaper products aren't always the best value.

We also discovered that in some cases you're far better off buying supermarket sausages than branded ones. A Richmond sausage contains the same amount of pork as a Sainsbury's Basics sausage (its value range), but you're paying three times as much (see p26 for more).

While higher meat content may lead to higher levels of fat, more meat also means more protein, which will keep you feeling fuller for longer.

## **WHAT CAN GO IN MEAT PRODUCTS?**

In the aftermath of the horsemeat scandal, you'll want to know exactly what goes into the meat products you buy.

A meat product is defined as a food that contains meat but also another ingredient, such as water or cereal. Therefore, minced meat is meat, but burgers, ham, bacon, sausages, sliced meats, meat pies and breaded chicken are meat products. In a recent Which? survey, 60% of the UK public thought manufacturers use all parts of the animal in meat products. In fact, there are strict regulations that control what can be called meat, what parts of an animal can be used and how these products must be labelled.

Certain meat products, such as sausages, burgers and pies, can only be called by a specific name (known as a reserved description) if they match minimum meat contents.

So you can't call a sausage a 'pork sausage' unless it has a minimum of 42% pork meat, but a product simply described as a sausage can contain much less: either 32% pork, 26% chicken, or 30% beef or lamb. An economy beef burger must be 47% beef, while a beef burger must be 62% beef. If it's a hamburger, the meat must be beef, pork or a mix of the two, and contain a minimum of 62% meat.

These minimum meat contents leave a lot of space for other ingredients to bulk up the products. Often water and a form of cereal (rusk or wheat) are added, but other bulking agents we've found include pork fat and rind (in sausages) and beef fat (in burgers).

## **IS IT MEAT?**

Not all body parts of the animal are considered to be meat. The term meat can only be used for

skeletal muscle (and the naturally contained fat and connective tissue, such as collagen). Fattier meats, such as pork and beef, have higher fat limits than leaner meats – chicken, for example.

Parts of the animal, such as liver, heart and kidneys, don't count towards the meat content (39% of you thought they could). These can be used, but must be listed separately in the ingredients. The same goes for mechanically recovered meat (MRM), which is removed from bones using machines. Dr Duncan Campbell, public analyst, told us: 'Many hotdogs don't qualify as sausages, as they have no ingredients that are classed as meat. They consist mainly of MRM-chicken and skin.'

Parts of the animal that can't be used are brains, feet, large and small intestines, lungs, oesophagus, rectum, spinal cord, spleen, stomach, testicles and udder. Intestines can be used as the casing for sausages and other similar products.

However, meat from parts of the animal that you wouldn't necessarily expect to consume can be used, such as meat from the head (although not the masseter muscle, used for mastication), cheeks and the lower parts of the leg. Dr Campbell says: 'Sausages contain a lot of different bits of meat. Although meat content can be estimated by laboratory analysis, an accurate assessment requires a full audit of the production process.'

This audit process would be carried out by trading standards officers, who visit a manufacturer to see what goes into the mixing bowl.

### THE VALUE OF MEAT

Cost doesn't always reflect quality. Supermarket own-brand ranges can be much better value for money, even when they cost more.

Richmond Thick Sausages contain 42% pork, the same as Sainsbury's Basics Pork Sausages, but cost £2.40 compared with 80p (both 454g) – more than three times as much. By paying 59p more than Richmond's for the Sainsbury's' premium range (£2.99, 400g), you would get more than twice as much meat and no extra pork fat.

The most expensive ingredient in a sausage is by far the meat, so, below, we worked out how much you pay for it (not considering the cost of the other ingredients).

The meat in the Richmond sausage works out at £12.59 per kg. Wall's Thick Pork Sausages (£2.74, 454g) – another popular brand – contain 61% meat, which costs £9.89 per kg of meat. Tesco Pork Chipolatas, which also have 61% meat, cost £6.70 per kg of meat, while Sainsbury's British Pork Sausages (59% meat), cost £5.19 per kg of meat.

Equally, within a supermarket range, cheaper products don't always offer as much

value as you might think. Asda Pork Sausages (£1.38, 454g) contain 56% pork and cost £5.43 per kg of meat. Its Butcher's Selection British Pork Sausages (£1.85, 454g) contain 72% pork but only cost £5.66 per kg of meat.

Not only are you often getting the same or better value for money from own-brand sausages, but a sausage with higher meat content contains more protein and so keeps you feeling fuller for longer.

### WHAT ELSE IS IN SAUSAGES?

The other ingredients, such as the fillers (rusk, breadcrumbs and potato starch), are cheap. Vegetable protein and stabilisers are also added, as these help to bind the meat in the sausage so it has a more consistent texture.

Other common additives are antioxidants and colourings. Antioxidants, such as E307 and ascorbic acid, stop the colour of the meat fading and prevent the fats in the meats oxidising and turning rancid. An example of a colouring is cochineal – extracted from an insect of the same name.

### GOVERNMENT CHANGES?

Based on our research, accurate labelling that clearly shows what's included is key to knowing which meat products are healthiest and the best value. Not complying with the meat and food information regulations is currently a



### Richmond Thick Sausages

**Cost per pack** £2.40 (454g)

**% of meat** 42%

**Cost per kg of meat** £12.59

#### Other ingredients

Water, pork fat (10%), rusk (wheat), potato starch, vegetable protein, salt, flavourings, stabilisers (diphosphates, guar gum), antioxidants (E300 and E307), preservatives (sodium metabisulphite), colour (cochineal)



### Sainsbury's Basics Pork Sausages

**(Value range)**

**Cost per pack** 80p (454g)

**% of meat** 42%

**Cost per kg of meat** £4.20

#### Other ingredients

Water, rusk (wheat flour), pork fat, wheat gluten, dextrose, salt, breadcrumbs, stabilisers (diphosphate), spices, preservative (sodium sulphite), yeast extract, natural flavouring, antioxidant (ascorbic acid)



### Sainsbury's British Pork Sausages

**(Standard range)**

**Cost per pack** £1.39 (454g)

**% of meat** 59%

**Cost per kg of meat** £5.19

#### Other ingredients

Water, rusk (wheat flour), pork fat, pork rind, salt, dextrose, spices, stabilisers (disodium diphosphate), preservative (sodium sulphite), yeast extract, herb extract, antioxidants (ascorbic acid)



### Sainsbury's Taste The Difference Ultimate Pork Sausages

**(Premium range)**

**Cost per pack** £2.99 (400g)

**% of meat** 97%

**Cost per kg of meat** £7.71

#### Other ingredients

Breadcrumb (wheat flour, yeast, salt), salt, white pepper, dried onion, preservative (sodium metabisulphite), nutmeg, sage, coriander, antioxidant (ascorbic acid)

criminal offence, carrying a maximum penalty of £5,000. However, the governments of England, Wales and Northern Ireland are proposing to decriminalise food labelling violations. If these changes go ahead it would mean, for example, that those responsible for horsemeat entering the food chain wouldn't have committed a criminal offence.

The government in England is also proposing to drop the Quantitative Ingredient Declarations (QUID) on meat products sold loose (in butchers, farmers' markets and delis, for example), so shoppers won't be able to see how much meat is in the products they buy. However, 79% of you told us that you check ingredients and meat content on labelling.

If these changes go ahead, the next time you're at the deli counter and see three different sausages, you wouldn't know which one contains 60%, 85% or 97% meat, or be able to work out which offers better value for money.

### WHICH? SAYS

Which? opposes the government's proposals, as they send a signal that food fraud and misleading labelling will not be taken seriously, especially at a time when

contaminants such as horsemeat have entered the food chain. Which? is concerned that decriminalising food labelling violations will lead to less testing of products, meaning that adulteration of our food may not be detected.

It's important that we're able to make informed food choices and that we can trust what we read on a packet. Our research in February 2013 revealed that trust in the food and grocery sectors dropped by 24% in the wake of the horsemeat scandal. Clear, accurate labelling is essential in order to raise trust and ensure that people can easily assess the quality and value of the products they buy, particularly at a time when budgets are squeezed. With food fraud on the rise, food labelling rules also need to be enforced effectively.

### OUR RESEARCH

We surveyed 2,002 UK adults online in May. In February 2013 we surveyed 2,062 UK adults online about how the horsemeat scandal had affected their shopping habits.

To compare the value of each pack, we worked out the cost of 1kg of the meat (the most expensive ingredient) based only on the percentage of meat each product contained.

“ ” **WHAT DO YOU THINK** about the government's plans to decriminalise food labelling violations and drop labelling on loose meat sold at butchers and deli counters? Join the debate on Which? Conversation at [www.which.co.uk/meatproducts](http://www.which.co.uk/meatproducts)

## What's in supermarket burgers?



**77% BEEF**  
**£8.30 PER KG**  
**OF MEAT**

Supermarket standard range burgers contain around 85% beef and their premium ranges contain around 94%. Fillers we found included rusk, water, onion and beef fat.

As with sausages, there are some instances when premium ranges work out cheaper than standard ones.

Asda's Butcher's Selection BBQ Beef



**90% BEEF**  
**£6.12 PER KG**  
**OF MEAT**

Burgers (£3, 454g) contain 82% beef and cost £8.06 per kg of meat. Its Extra Special Scotch Beef Burgers (£3.29, 454g) contain 94% beef, costing £7.71 per kg of meat.

Per kilo of meat, Birds Eye burgers cost more than a supermarket fresh burger. Birds Eye Original Beef Burgers (£1.45, 227g) contain 77% beef and cost £8.30 per kg of

meat. Tesco 1/4lb Beef Burgers (£2.50, 454g) contain 90% beef and cost £6.12 per kg of meat.

So, as a general rule of thumb, choose burgers with around 85% beef or more. Not only will they taste better, they'll often work out as better value for money.

To find out about the differences in various ranges of ham, read our news story on p5.

## EXPERT VIEW

### Can I trade down?



**To discover if compromising on price means compromising on taste, we asked chef Adam Byatt of Trinity**

**restaurant - highly rated in The Good Food Guide - to taste a range of value, standard and premium sausages and burgers.**

When raw, premium sausages have a good varied pink colour, are chunky and you can see the herbs. Comparatively, sausages with less than 60% pork have a uniform pale, pasty colour, and look almost translucent.

When cooked, premium sausages with a high meat content suffer very little shrinkage, have a nice varied texture and the flavour of the pork really comes through.

The sausages with 42% meat shrunk during cooking as water was lost. The overriding taste was of wheat and breadcrumbs, then salt; the flavour of pork was lost. The texture was almost like that of a paté.

I wouldn't buy a sausage with less than 60% pork; I would go for the highest meat content I could afford. If not premium, try and stretch to the ranges that contain around 72% pork - the ones I tasted were good.

Both the premium and standard burgers had a good red colour and texture. They both had a high meat content - 90% and above - so didn't shrink when cooked. The Birds Eye burger was smaller and greyer. It had the lowest meat content (77%) and shrunk when cooked as it lost the extra fat added to bulk it out.

The lower meat content burger had an overriding taste of onion - used as a filler. Conversely, the taste of beef really came through in the standard and premium burgers. In the premium range you might pay more for knowing the exact origin and type of animal, whereas the standard range simply states 'UK beef'. But in terms of taste, I'd happily eat the standard burger.

Watch a video of Adam showing you how to judge the quality of meat products to see if you should trade down. [www.which.co.uk/meatvid](http://www.which.co.uk/meatvid)