

Post-Brexit trade deals may cause 1,500 additional diet-related deaths every year—new study

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Credit: Jason Benz Bennee / shutterstock

From chlorinated chicken to [hormone-injected beef](#), the UK's food supply could soon change for the worse if a series of new trade deals come into force.

The UK is heavily reliant on imports and therefore especially vulnerable to changes in trade policy. Half of all food consumed in the UK is [imported](#), including more than three-quarters of all fruits and vegetables. At the same time, poor diets with too few fruits and vegetables, too much red and processed meat, and too many calories are one of the most important [causes for deaths](#) that could otherwise be prevented.

Any new trade and agriculture policy risks making diets even worse if no safeguards are put into place. In a new study published in the journal [Nature Food](#), my colleague Florian Freund and I found that post-Brexit trade deals with the US and major Commonwealth countries could lead to unhealthier diets in the UK, with 1,500 additional diet-related deaths every year.

Post-Brexit trade deals

Most of the food imported to the UK currently comes from the EU. Brexit has already caused disruptions to this trade route, and more are expected when the transition period ends in July. The official response has been a focus on striking new trade deals with countries outside the EU, such as [the US](#), [Australia](#) and other Commonwealth countries, while at the same time issuing new domestic policies affecting food and agriculture.

For our study, we set out to analyse the impact these post-Brexit policies could have on the British food system, diets and health. We used a detailed model of the economy, agriculture and trade to track how these new trade and agriculture policies would influence the import, export and price of foods in the UK, and how those changes would affect domestic production and consumption.

We then used a dietary health model for the UK that tracks how changes in food intake affect the chance of dying from diseases such as heart disease, stroke, cancers, and type 2 diabetes. Eating less fruit and vegetables, for example, is known to increase disease risks, as is eating more red meat, including beef, lamb and pork, and generally eating more calories than needed.

The costs of Global Britain

According to our analysis, new free-trade agreements with the US and Commonwealth countries could have substantial impacts for the British food system. Compared to a post-Brexit situation without the new agreements, imports of beef could increase by almost 50%, and those of pork and wheat by around 20%. Domestic prices and production would go down as a result, while

consumption would go up, leading to more diet-related diseases from red meat intake and extra calories.

Fortunately, such a situation could be avoided if trade and agriculture policies became more health-sensitive. One solution would be to eliminate tariffs only for imports of healthier foods such as fruits, vegetables, legumes and nuts. Free-trade agreements for vegetables could help address their chronic underconsumption in the UK, while keeping ever more red meat and junk food from the US and elsewhere at bay—with benefits for diets and health.

Additional benefits can be had by making domestic food production more aligned with health concerns. For example, a portion of farm subsidies could be earmarked for growing foods with beneficial health and environmental characteristics—think again fruits, vegetables, legumes and nuts. We estimated that if at least one-quarter of subsidies were used in this way, then domestic production of those foods could rise by about 20%. This would contribute to healthier diets while also making domestic agriculture healthier and more sustainable, and thereby more future-proof.

If done right, trade agreements can improve access to healthy foods and increase the diversity of our food supply. However, unless concerns over healthy diets are factored in, these deals risk leading to an unhealthier food supply and poorer health. A free-trade for vegetables scheme, coupled with a health and environmentally sensitive reform of agricultural subsidies, could be good starting points for safeguarding healthy diets in a post-Brexit Britain.

More information: F. Freund et al, Policy analysis indicates health-sensitive trade and subsidy reforms are needed in the UK to avoid adverse dietary health impacts post-Brexit, *Nature Food* (2021). [DOI: 10.1038/s43016-021-00306-9](https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-021-00306-9)

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