

More Reasons to Avoid Ultraprocessed Foods

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✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › In the most comprehensive assessment to date, ultraprocessed foods were associated with an increased risk of developing and dying from cancer
- › Consuming more ultraprocessed foods was linked with a greater risk of developing any cancer, as well as ovarian and brain cancers specifically
- › Consumption of ultraprocessed food was also associated with an increased risk of dying from cancer, including ovarian and breast cancers
- › Each 10% increase in ultraprocessed food consumption was associated with a 6% increase in risk of cancer mortality overall, along with a 16% increase in risk of breast cancer mortality and 30% for ovarian cancer mortality
- › The health risks of ultraprocessed foods are concerning enough that one researcher called for warning labels to be added to their packaging so consumers can make informed dietary decisions

Globally, 1 in 6 deaths is caused by cancer, an especially tragic statistic since it's estimated that at least 50% of cancer causes are preventable.¹ One key risk factor you can modify to lower your risk? Diet, including intake of ultraprocessed foods.

In the most comprehensive assessment to date of the link between ultraprocessed food consumption and cancers, researchers from Imperial College London's School of Public Health found these cheap convenience foods are linked to an increased risk of developing and dying from cancer.²

Intake of ultraprocessed foods is on the rise worldwide. In the U.S. and the U.K., more than half of daily caloric intake comes from these junk foods.³ What exactly are ultraprocessed foods (UPFs)? The Imperial College London researchers defines them as:⁴

"... foods that are industrial formulations made by assembling industrially-derived food substances and food additives through a sequence of extensive industrial processes. UPFs contain little or no whole foods and are often energy dense, high in salt, sugar and fat, low in fiber, and liable to overconsumption.

They are aggressively marketed with strong brands to promote consumption and are gradually displacing traditional dietary patterns based on fresh and minimally processed food."

Ultraprocessed Foods Linked to Ovarian, Brain Cancers

The study involved data from the diets of 197,426 people between the ages of 40 and 69 years. Participants' health was monitored for 10 years; the mean consumption of ultraprocessed foods was 22.9%.

Overall, consuming more ultraprocessed foods was linked with a greater risk of developing any cancer, as well as ovarian and brain cancers specifically. It was also associated with an increased risk of dying from cancer, including ovarian and breast cancers. Further:⁵

- Each 10% increase in ultraprocessed food consumption was linked to a 2% increased incidence of cancer overall and a 19% increased incidence of ovarian cancer.
- Each 10% increase in ultraprocessed food consumption was associated with a 6% increase in risk of cancer mortality overall, along with a 16% increase in risk of breast cancer mortality and 30% for ovarian cancer mortality.

Study author Kiara Chang of Imperial College London's School of Public Health said in a news release:⁶

"The average person in the UK consumes more than half of their daily energy intake from ultra-processed foods. This is exceptionally high and concerning as ultra-processed foods are produced with industrially derived ingredients and often use food additives to adjust color, flavor, consistency, texture, or extend shelf life.

Our bodies may not react the same way to these ultra-processed ingredients and additives as they do to fresh and nutritious minimally processed foods. However, ultra-processed foods are everywhere and highly marketed with cheap price and attractive packaging to promote consumption. This shows our food environment needs urgent reform to protect the population from ultra-processed foods."

UPFs Linked to 29% Higher Risk of Colorectal Cancer

The Imperial College London study was observational and therefore can't establish a causal link. However, past research has revealed similar cancer risks. In one study, men who consumed the most ultraprocessed foods had a 29% higher risk of developing colorectal cancer than those who consumed the least.⁷

Among subgroups of ultraprocessed foods, ready-to-eat meat, poultry and seafood products along with sugar-sweetened beverages were associated with increased colorectal cancer risk.⁸

There are a number of reasons why ultraprocessed foods likely increase cancer risk, not the least of which is their link to other conditions that increase cancer risk, like obesity and Type 2 diabetes. Plus, ultraprocessed foods are nutritionally inferior to their fresh counterparts.

However, ultraprocessing a food also leads to "alteration of food matrices" that "results in degradation of food health potential and deterioration of nutrient bioavailability and

bioaccessibility,” the researchers explained. Further:⁹

“Emerging research has suggested other common properties of UPFs that may contribute to adverse cancer outcomes, including through the use of controversial food additives, neofomed contaminants during ultra-processing, and toxic contaminants migrated from food packaging.”

Phthalates and bisphenols-F are among the common endocrine-disrupting chemicals in ultraprocessed food packaging that have been linked to human cancers and DNA damage.¹⁰

‘We Need ... Front-of-Pack Warning Labels’

The health risks of ultraprocessed foods are concerning enough that Chang called for warning labels to be added to their packaging so consumers can make informed dietary decisions. She said:¹¹

“We need clear front of pack warning labels for ultra-processed foods to aid consumer choices, and our sugar tax should be extended to cover ultra-processed fizzy drinks, fruit-based and milk-based drinks, as well as other ultra-processed products.

Lower income households are particularly vulnerable to these cheap and unhealthy ultra-processed foods. Minimally processed and freshly prepared meals should be subsidized to ensure everyone has access to healthy, nutritious and affordable options.”

Indeed, a warning label isn’t a stretch, considering eating ultraprocessed foods has also been found to be a significant cause of premature death, according to researchers with the University of São Paulo in Brazil.¹²

That study found about 57,000 premature deaths were due to the consumption of ultraprocessed foods, which amounted to 10.5% of all-cause premature deaths, and 21.8% of premature deaths from noncommunicable diseases¹³ among this age group.¹⁴

Among Americans, ultraprocessed foods make up about 57% of daily calories, on average, leading the researchers to suggest premature deaths linked to the foods are likely even greater in the U.S.¹⁵ In Brazil, meanwhile, the study found that if the contribution of ultraprocessed foods to total caloric intake was reduced by 10% to 50%, anywhere from 5,900 to 29,300 deaths could be prevented, annually.¹⁶

Further, the researchers estimated that if ultraprocessed foods made up less than 23% of adults' daily calories, about 20,000 premature deaths could be prevented each year.¹⁷ A study of 22,985 adults in Italy also found those who consumed the most ultraprocessed foods had the highest risk for all-cause and cardiovascular mortality.¹⁸

UPFs Increase Risk of Cognitive Decline

Consuming heavily processed junk food takes a toll on your whole body, including your brain. Research published in *JAMA Neurology* demonstrated that consuming UPFs such as breakfast cereal, frozen foods and soda could lead to cognitive decline and increase your risk of Alzheimer's disease.¹⁹

The study involved 10,775 people living in Brazil over an eight-year period. The data showed a correlation between an individual's "high consumption" of ultraprocessed food, such that high consumption led to a 28% faster decline in global cognitive scores, including memory, verbal fluency and executive function.²⁰

However, instead of using 50% or 60% of the daily caloric intake of ultraprocessed food as high consumption, this study defined high consumption as "more than 20%." The study didn't identify whether there was a dose-dependent effect. In other words, they only looked at whether eating more than 20% of the daily caloric intake in ultraprocessed foods would affect cognitive decline. If a person ate double or triple that amount, would the rate of cognitive decline be greater?

Another study also found brain risks of ultraprocessed foods. It included 72,083 participants aged 55 years or older. Over a 10-year follow-up period, consumption of

ultraprocessed food was associated with an increased risk of dementia and vascular dementia.²¹

Meanwhile, replacing just 10% of ultraprocessed foods in the diet with unprocessed or minimally processed foods was associated with a 19% lower risk of dementia – highlighting how powerful even minimal healthy dietary changes can be.

“Although more research is needed, as a neuroscientist who researches how diet can influence cognition later in life,” Sara Burke, associate professor of neurobiology and cognitive aging at the University of Florida, wrote in Science Alert, “I find that these early studies add a new layer for considering how fundamental nutrition is to brain health.”²²

Are Fake Foods the Most Ultraprocessed of All?

As research pours in over the health risks of ultraprocessed foods, it’s ironic that fake meat and other lab-made plant-based pseudofoods are still being passed off as healthy. It’s hard to ultraprocess a food more than a lab-made burger.

Plant-based or lab-grown meat and dairy alternatives are the very definition of ultraprocessed foods, containing no healthy animal fats but, rather, heavily processed fats from industrial seed oils like soy and canola oil.

A hallmark of ultraprocessed foods is their long ingredient lists. “You are not likely to find the ingredients that make up most of these foods in your home kitchen,” Burke said.²³ Beyond Burger’s fake meat patties, for instance, contain 22 ingredients. Among them are expeller-pressed canola oil, pea protein isolate, cellulose from bamboo, modified food starch and methylcellulose²⁴ – hardly “health” foods.

To morph these ingredients into a patty that resembles meat requires significant processing, so don’t fall for the hype that fake foods are somehow good for you. They’re likely to cause all of the same health problems now being linked to more obvious ultraprocessed foods, such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer, along with all-cause mortality.²⁵

Is it coincidence, then, that according to the World Economic Forum and other Great Reset proponents, a traditional whole food diet is being vilified as unsustainable and environmentally destructive? Instead, they're pushing for a transition away from whole foods to a highly unnatural, ultraprocessed food diet.

For example, the EAT Forum, cofounded by the Wellcome Trust, developed a Planetary Health Diet²⁶ designed to be applied to the global population. It entails cutting meat and dairy intake by up to 90%, replacing it largely with foods made in laboratories, along with cereals and oil.

Their largest initiative is called FReSH, which aims to transform the food system by working with biotech and fake meat companies to replace whole foods with lab-created alternatives that are certain to be detrimental to human health.

Start by Cutting Out Toxic Seed Oils

There's little doubt that ultraprocessed foods have no place in a healthy diet. Eliminating them means avoiding junk foods, fast foods and many packaged items in your grocery store, from bread and pizza to cookies, salted crackers and meat products such as lunch meat and hot dogs. If you want one ingredient to target, however, start with seed oils, also known as vegetable oils, such as corn oil, soybean oil, sunflower oil and canola oil.

In the last 50 years, global vegetable oil production increased 10-fold, rising from 17 million tons in the 1960s to 170 million tons in 2014 – and 218 million tons in 2018.²⁷ Vegetable and seed oils are high in the omega-6 fatty acid linoleic acid (LA).²⁸

While an essential fat, when consumed in excessive amounts LA acts as a metabolic poison. The reason for this is because polyunsaturated fats such as LA are highly susceptible to oxidation.

As Americans consumed greater amounts of seed oils high in LA, there was an increase in the concentration of LA in subcutaneous fat tissue, which correlates with an increase in the prevalence of asthma, obesity and diabetes.²⁹ Eliminating ultraprocessed foods

from your diet is essential to keeping your LA intake low, and vice versa, as the two go hand-in-hand.

If the thought of overhauling your diet to remove ultraprocessed foods seems daunting, reframe it from a move of scarcity to one of abundance. By giving up these toxic junk foods, you're gaining a place in your diet to add in whole foods, which – instead of taking away your health one meal at a time – will give your body the nutrients it needs to heal and stay well.

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