

# Ultimate 'Lung Foods,' an Important Read if You're Over 30

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#) ✓ Fact Checked

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › The dangers of excess sugar consumption have been well-established and were officially recognized in the 2015-2020 U.S. dietary guidelines, which recommend limiting added sugars to 10% of daily calories
- › Sixty percent of the processed foods consumed by Americans are ultraprocessed and account for 90% of the added sugar consumption in the U.S.
- › Examples of ultraprocessed foods include breakfast cereals, pizza, chicken nuggets, soda, chips, salty/sweet/savory snacks, packaged baked goods, microwaveable frozen meals, instant soups and sauces
- › Studies have highlighted the risks of processed high-sugar diets, showing excessive sugar consumption is at the very core of many of our current disease epidemics as it drives obesity and insulin resistance
- › French researchers now warn that ultraprocessed foods raise your risk of cancer, and the more ultraprocessed foods you eat, the greater your risk; each 10% increase in ultraprocessed food raised the cancer rate by 12%

**This article was previously published February 28, 2018, and has been updated with new information.**

The dangers of excess sugar consumption have been well-established and were officially recognized in the 2015-2020 U.S. Dietary Guidelines,<sup>1</sup> which recommend

limiting added sugars to a maximum of 10% of your daily calories.<sup>2</sup> Make no mistake, however, that this goal is nearly impossible to achieve on a processed food diet.

A fast-food meal consisting of a burger, fries and soda can easily add up to an entire day's worth of required calories, while leaving your body starving for vitamins, minerals, live enzymes, micronutrients and healthy fats. This kind of diet, consumed daily for months and years on end, will inevitably prevent you from maintaining good health.

In fact, research suggests refined high-carb diets are as risky as smoking, increasing your risk for lung cancer by as much as 49%.<sup>3</sup> Researchers have also predicted obesity will overtake smoking as a leading cause of cancer deaths.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, Americans not only eat a preponderance of processed food, but 57.9% of what adults eat is ultraprocessed<sup>5,6</sup> — products at the far end of the "significantly altered" spectrum — while 67% of children's diets consist of ultraprocessed foods.<sup>7</sup>

## **Definition of Ultraprocessed Food**

Examples of ultraprocessed foods include breakfast cereals, pizza, chicken nuggets, soda, chips and other salty/sweet/savory snacks, packaged baked goods, microwaveable frozen meals, instant soups and sauces and much more. More generally, ultraprocessed foods can be defined as food products containing one or more of the following:

- Ingredients that are not traditionally used in cooking
- Unnaturally high amounts of sugar, salt, processed industrial oils and unhealthy fats
- Artificial flavors, colors, chemical sweeteners and other additives that imitate sensorial qualities of unprocessed or minimally processed foods (examples include additives that create textures and pleasing mouthfeel)
- Preservatives and chemicals that impart an unnaturally long shelf-life
- Genetically engineered (GE) ingredients, which in addition to carrying potential health risks also tend to be heavily contaminated with toxic herbicides such as glyphosate, 2,4-D and dicamba

Specifically, foods that fall in those categories include just about anything that comes in a box, can or plastic package, including commercial breads, sandwich meats and canned soups.<sup>8</sup> Even some canned fish and meats contain processed additives that include sugars and vegetable oils.

When it comes to sugar, not only is it a highly addictive substance (surpassing that of cocaine, according to some studies), but other ingredients are also highly addictive, especially salt and fat. In fact, the processed food industry has developed "craveability" into an art form. Nothing is left to chance, and by making their foods addictive, manufacturers ensure repeat sales.

## **Ultraprocessed Foods Linked to Cancer**

A number of studies have highlighted the risks of processed high-sugar diets, showing excessive sugar consumption is at the very core of many of our current disease epidemics as it drives obesity and insulin resistance. More recently, French researchers warn that ultraprocessed foods raise your risk of cancer, and the more ultraprocessed foods you eat, the greater your risk.<sup>9,10,11,12</sup>

Nearly 105,000 study participants, a majority of whom were middle-aged women, were followed for an average of five years. On average, 18% of their diet was ultraprocessed, and the results showed that each 10% increase in ultraprocessed food raised the cancer rate by 12%, which worked out to nine additional cancer cases per 10,000 people per year.

The risk of breast cancer specifically went up by 11% for every 10% increase in ultraprocessed food. Sugary drinks, fatty foods and sauces were most strongly associated with cancer in general, while sugary foods had the strongest correlation to breast cancer. According to the authors, "These results suggest that the rapidly increasing consumption of ultraprocessed foods may drive an increasing burden of cancer in the next decades."

Co-author Mathilde Touvier told CNN Health,<sup>13</sup> "It was quite surprising, the strength of the results. They were really strongly associated, and we did many sensitive analys[e]s and adjusted the findings for many co-factors, and still, the results here were quite concerning." Confounding factors may also be at play, though, as those who ate a lot of ultra-processed foods were also more likely to smoke and use oral contraceptives, exercise less and eat more calories overall.

## **Diet Is a Key Factor Determining Your Health and Longevity**

Research<sup>14</sup> published last year linked poor diet to an increased risk of cardiometabolic mortality (death resulting from Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke). According to the authors, suboptimal intake of key foods such as fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds, and animal-based omega-3, along with excessive consumption of processed foods such as meats and sugar-sweetened beverages accounted for more than 45% of all cardiometabolic deaths in 2012.

In other words, the more processed foods you eat, and the fewer whole foods you consume, the greater your risk of chronic disease and death. Other research found that eating fried potatoes (such as french fries, hash browns and potato chips) two or more times per week may double your risk of death from all causes.<sup>15</sup> Eating potatoes that were not fried was not linked to an increase in mortality risk, suggesting frying – and most likely the choice of oil – is the main problem.

## **Ultraprocessed Food Has Become the Norm**

Americans are not the only ones eating too much fake food. As mentioned, research suggests almost 60% of the calories in the average American diet come from ultraprocessed food, but Canadians and the British are not far behind, with ultraprocessed fare making up 50% of their diets as well.<sup>16</sup> The developed world in general eat significant amounts of processed food, and disease statistics reveal the inherent folly of this trend.

There's really no doubt that decreasing your sugar consumption is at the top of the list if you're overweight, insulin resistant or struggle with any chronic disease. It's been estimated that simply adding sugar labels to products could save the American health care system as much as \$31 billion in health care costs, preventing 354,400 cases of cardiovascular disease and 599,300 cases of type 2 diabetes mellitus over the 20 years.<sup>17</sup>

In the U.S., more than \$1 trillion is spent on treating sugar and junk food-related diseases each year,<sup>18</sup> which runs the gamut from obesity and diabetes, to heart disease and cancer. According to a report<sup>19</sup> on the global cancer burden, published in 2014, obesity is responsible for an estimated 500,000 cancer cases worldwide each year. A more recent British report estimates obesity may result in an additional 670,000 cancer cases in the U.K. alone over the next 20 years.

## **Expenditures for Obesity-Related Illnesses Are on the Rise**

For the first time, we now also have information on how obesity affects the health care expenditures for each individual U.S. state. According to "The Impact of Obesity on Medical Costs and Labor Market Outcomes in the U.S."<sup>20</sup> a report co-produced in 2018 by analysts at Cornell University and Lehigh University:<sup>21</sup>

- In the studied timeframe, Arizona, California, Florida, New York and Pennsylvania spent between 5 and 6% of their medical expenditures on obesity-related illnesses
- North Carolina, Ohio and Wisconsin each spent over 12% of their medical expenditures on obesity-related illnesses
- Nationally, health care expenses related to obesity increased by 29% between 2001 and 2015
- Between 2001 and 2015, over 20% of the Medicaid spending in Kentucky and Wisconsin were devoted to the treatment of obesity-related illnesses, compared to 11% in New York

- Nationally, the average Medicaid expenditures for obesity-related illnesses were just over 8% between 2001 and 2015

Since then, an even newer study found in 2021 that obesity is at epidemic proportions in the U.S., accounting for \$170 billion in excess medical costs every year. “They further found that being overweight and obese accounted for over \$200 billion or over \$600 per person in excess health care costs every year in the US,” Forbes reported.<sup>22</sup>

## **Plastic Contamination – Another Pressing Concern**

Plastic pollution is also taking its toll on health, as both food and water are becoming increasingly contaminated with these toxic bits. According to the environmental advocacy group Ocean Conservancy, some plastic products persist for so long, they'll still be recognizable after 400 years.<sup>23</sup>

An equally alarming problem is the plastic that gets broken down into microscopic pieces. Microplastic particles, which are less than 5 millimeters long, are literally clouding the oceans in spots.

Carried along with the ocean's currents, swirling gyres of "plastic smog"<sup>24</sup> now cover about 40% of the world's ocean surfaces.<sup>25</sup> They're being eaten by fish and other marine life – that is well-known. But only recently did researchers take the logical next step to determine that it's not only marine life ingesting plastic – you probably are too.

Research<sup>26</sup> commissioned by media outlet Orb revealed alarming data about plastic pollution in tap water, with 83% of samples tested worldwide coming back as contaminated. In the U.S., 94% of tap water samples were found to contain plastic – the most out of all the locations tested. Orb notes six primary sources of "invisible plastics," one of which is synthetic microfibers from synthetic clothing like fleece, acrylic and polyester.

Microfibers are released during washing, to the tune of 1 million tons a year, and the irregular shape of these plastic particles may render them more difficult for marine life to excrete than other microplastics.

Microbeads – those tiny plastic pellets you may have seen in your face wash or hand soap – are another primary source of plastic pollution that makes its way back to your dinner plate and into your body. Microbeads are so small they get flushed down the bathroom drain and easily travel through wastewater treatment plants, as they're too small to be caught during the filtration process.

Eight million tons of single-use plastics like forks, bags, straws and takeout containers also enter our waterways each year and, eventually, these items also get broken down into microplastics. As a result of all this plastic pollution, one-third of the fish caught in the English Channel contain microbeads, as do 83% of scampi sold in the U.K.<sup>27</sup> Most sea salt also contains plastic fragments.

## **Plastic Also Pollutes Farmland**

Plastic pollution is also accumulating on farmland. According to research<sup>28</sup> published in Science of the Total Environment, the annual release of plastics to land is estimated to be four to 23 times greater than that released to oceans. The use of sewage sludge (biosolids) as fertilizer may be particularly problematic. Data suggests between 125 and 850 tons of microplastics per million inhabitants may be added to European agricultural soils each year.

When factoring in the range of sludge application rates, and assuming data from certain other countries with similar plastics usage are comparable, the total annual input of microplastics to European and North American farmlands is thought to be 63,000 to 430,000, and 44,000 to 300,000 tons respectively.

According to the researchers, this is "an alarmingly high input," exceeding the total accumulated burden of 93,000 to 236,000 tons microplastics present in ocean surface water around the globe.<sup>29</sup>

## **To Improve Your Health, Cut Your Processed Food Intake**

About 90% of the money Americans spend on food goes to buy processed food.<sup>30,31,32</sup> When you consider that nearly 60% of that food is ultraprocessed,<sup>33</sup> in essence, more than half of what the average American eats in any given day are convenience foods that can be bought at your local gas station. Less than 30% of calories come from unprocessed or minimally processed foods, and fewer than 1% of daily calories come from vegetables!

Aside from being far from natural and hence devoid of valuable nutrients, ultraprocessed foods also account for 90% of the added sugar consumption in the U.S. About 2% of the calories in processed foods come from added sugars. By definition, unprocessed or minimally processed contain none. Ultraprocessed foods, on the other hand, get 21% of their calories from added sugars.

For this reason, cutting your sugar consumption necessitates cutting out processed, especially ultraprocessed, foods – basically any food that isn't directly from the vine, bush, tree or from the earth. Research shows only 7.5% of the U.S. population, namely those with the lowest processed food consumption, actually meet the U.S. dietary recommendations of getting a maximum of 10% of your daily calories from sugars.<sup>34</sup>

## **What Makes for a Healthy Diet?**

In my view, eating a diet consisting of 90% real food and only 10% or less processed foods is a doable goal for most that could make a significant difference in your weight and overall health. Unless I'm traveling, my diet is very close to 100% real food, much of it grown on my property. You simply need to make the commitment and place a high priority on it. Here are some general dietary guidelines that will help you take control of your health:

---

Focus on raw, fresh foods, and avoid as many processed foods as possible (if it comes in a can, bottle or package, and has a list of ingredients, it's processed)

---

Severely restrict carbohydrates (refined sugars, fructose and processed grains)

---



Increase healthy fat consumption to somewhere between 50 and 85% of daily calories. (Remember, eating dietary fat isn't what's making you pack on pounds. It's the sugar/fructose and grains that add the padding)

---

You may eat an unlimited amount of non-starchy vegetables. Because they are so low in calories, the majority of the food on your plate should be vegetables

---

Limit the use of protein to less than 0.5 gram per pound of lean body weight

---

Replace sodas and other sweetened beverages with pure, filtered water

---

## Sources and References

---

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Dietary Guidelines 2015-2020
- <sup>2</sup> NBC News January 7, 2016
- <sup>3</sup> Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention March 2016, DOI: 10.1158/1055-9965.EPI-15-0765
- <sup>4</sup> USA Today June 9, 2017
- <sup>5</sup> BMJ Open 2016; 6:e009892
- <sup>6</sup> The Atlantic March 10, 2016
- <sup>7, 8</sup> Food Navigator-USA. Study: Is Ultraprocessed Food Taking Over the US Diet? October 18, 2021
- <sup>9</sup> BMJ 2018; 360:k322
- <sup>10</sup> BBC News February 15, 2018
- <sup>11</sup> Time Magazine February 14, 2018
- <sup>12</sup> The Guardian February 14, 2018
- <sup>13, 16</sup> CNN Health February 14, 2018
- <sup>14</sup> JAMA 2017;317(9):912-924
- <sup>15</sup> CNN, June 15, 2017
- <sup>17</sup> Food Business News Added Sugars Listing Could Save \$1 Billion April 17, 2019
- <sup>18</sup> Forbes October 27, 2013
- <sup>19</sup> Lancet Oncology January 2015; 16(1): 36-46
- <sup>20</sup> Clinical Chemistry 2018 Jan;64(1):108-117
- <sup>21</sup> Eurekalert February 8, 2018
- <sup>22</sup> Forbes March 31, 2021
- <sup>23</sup> Ocean Conservancy, Stemming the Tide
- <sup>24</sup> Huffington Post May 24, 2017
- <sup>25</sup> The Center for Biological Diversity, Plastics Pollution
- <sup>26</sup> Orb, Invisibles: The Plastic Inside Us
- <sup>27</sup> Daily Mail August 28, 2016

- <sup>28</sup> Science of the Total Environment May 15, 2017; 586: 127-141
- <sup>29</sup> Environmental Science & Technology September 29, 2016; 50(20): 10777-10779
- <sup>30</sup> Fast Food Nation by Eric Schlosser (Penguin Books 2001)
- <sup>31</sup> Rense August 23, 2007
- <sup>32</sup> PBS April 21, 2010
- <sup>33</sup> BMJ Open 2016;6:e009892
- <sup>34</sup> Time March 9, 2016