

60% of Calories Are From Ultraprocessed Food for Many People

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Ultraprocessed foods and drinks make up 61% of Americans' food intake; the amount is similar in Canada (62%) and the U.K. (63%)
- › Diet has a profound impact on your mental health, and ultraprocessed foods are among those linked to poor mood, depression and anxiety
- › Additives in ultraprocessed foods trigger neuroinflammation and pathogenic changes to neuronal mitochondrial function
- › Men and women who ate the most ultraprocessed foods had a 28% faster rate of cognitive decline and a 25% faster rate of decline in executive function compared to those who ate the least
- › In addition to cognitive decline and depression, eating junk foods is linked to metabolic syndrome, cancer and all-cause mortality, along with other mental and physical conditions

Ultraprocessed foods contribute to premature death.¹ But despite the steep health risks, 61% of Americans' food intake comes in the form of highly processed foods and drinks. The amount is similar in Canada (62%) and the U.K. (63%).²

These foods, though convenient, will slowly chip away at your vitality, causing your mental and physical health to suffer. How many ultraprocessed foods are on your plate

daily? To get an idea – and eliminate them – it’s important to first understand what, exactly, an ultraprocessed food is.

Ultraprocessed Foods Have Few, if Any, Whole Ingredients

Food processing spans a wide array of definition, such that a sliced apple, apple juice and apple-flavored products can all be described as processed – but with vastly different effects on your health. The more processed a food is, generally speaking, the worse it is for your health.

Packaged foods with long ingredient lists, including things you wouldn’t find in your own kitchen, are examples of ultraprocessed foods. Writing in *Frontiers in Nutrition*, one team of researchers explained:³

“The definition of ultra-processed foods has varied over the years and has not always been consistent. Ultra-processed foods were initially defined as industrial formulations with fats, sugars, and salt added during preparation, alongside other substances not used in normal cooking.

Unprocessed foods were defined as those that were either fresh or that had gone through minimal processing (drying, freezing, pasteurization, or fermentation) mainly to make them safer, accessible and palatable.”

While there are a number of systems that attempt to classify foods based on processing, the NOVA classification system is the most common. Its aim is to classify “all foods according to the nature, extent and purposes of the industrial processes they undergo.” Though not without controversy over its categories’ accuracy,⁴ NOVA defines food categories this way:⁵

- **NOVA1** – “Unprocessed or minimally processed foods,” primarily the edible parts of plants or animals that have been taken straight from nature or that have been minimally modified/preserved.

- **NOVA2** – “Culinary ingredients,” such as salt, oil, sugar or starch, which are produced from NOVA1 foods.
- **NOVA3** – “Processed foods,” such as freshly baked breads, canned vegetables or cured meats, obtained by combining NOVA1 and NOVA2 foods.
- **NOVA4** – “Ultraprocessed foods,” such as ready-to-eat industrially formulated products “made mostly or entirely from substances derived from foods and additives, with little if any intact Group 1 food.”

Another way to look at processed foods is by their nutrient density and makeup. “Ultraprocessed foods tend to be energy-dense, low-cost and nutrient-poor,” the Frontiers in Nutrition team explained.⁶

Over the last 12 years, prices for unprocessed foods increased at a greater rate than prices for ultraprocessed foods, leading researchers to suggest, “Low energy cost could be one mechanism linking ultraprocessed foods with negative health outcomes.”⁷ Their analysis found ultraprocessed foods are primarily grains (91%), fats and sweets (73%), dairy (71%) and beans, nuts and seeds (70%).

For comparison, “only 36% of meat, poultry and fish, 26% of vegetables and 20% of fruit” were classified as ultraprocessed. That being said, examples of ultraprocessed foods that are consumed the most in Brazil, include:⁸

Bread, cakes and pies	Margarine	Salted crackers
Cookies	Meat products including ham, hot dogs and hamburgers	Pizza
Sugar-sweetened beverages		

Eating Ultraprocessed Food Puts Mental Health at Risk

Diet has a profound impact on your mental health, and ultraprocessed foods are among those linked to poor mood, depression and anxiety. Animal studies show that eating unhealthy foods causes dysregulation in brain insulin, which lowers levels of serotonin and dopamine while increasing neuroinflammation.⁹

Poor diet also adversely affects gut health, which contributes to chronic systemic inflammation and neuroinflammation.¹⁰ Using a sample of 10,359 adults who were part of the U.S. National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey between 2007 and 2012, researchers explored the consumption of ultraprocessed foods (UPF) in relation to mental health.

“Individuals reporting higher intakes of UPF were significantly more likely to report mild depression, more mentally unhealthy and more anxious days and less likely to report zero mentally unhealthy or anxious days,” the study revealed.¹¹ As for why, one reason has to do with additives in processed foods, such as emulsifiers and artificial sweeteners, which can lead to pathophysiological changes such as:

- Impaired glucose tolerance
- Increases in inflammatory mediators
- Oxidative stress
- Neuroinflammation
- Pathogenic changes to neuronal mitochondrial function

The lack of essential nutrients in ultraprocessed foods is another element, with research suggesting consumption of nutrient-rich foods lowers mental health risks.

“When considering these data in the context of the totality of evidence, it can be hypothesized that a diet high in UPF provides an unfavorable combination of biologically active food additives with low essential nutrient content which together have an adverse effect on mental health symptoms,” the researchers noted.

Again, if you’re wondering what counts as “ultraprocessed” at the grocery store, more than 70% of packaged foods qualify. “The most commonly consumed UPF include many

sugar-sweetened beverages, reconstituted meat products, packaged snacks, chips, breakfast cereals, cookies, cake, chips, and breads and numerous other packaged foods,” the team explained.

Eating Junk Food Puts You at Risk of Cognitive Decline

Your brain is directly affected when you fuel your body with junk food. In a study of 10,775 people living in Brazil, consuming more ultraprocessed foods led to a higher rate of cognitive decline – including global and executive function – than consuming fewer over an eight-year period.

In the study, men and women who ate the most ultraprocessed foods had a 28% faster rate of cognitive decline and a 25% faster rate of decline in executive function compared to those who ate the least.¹²

Limiting consumption of ultraprocessed foods may therefore help reduce cognitive decline in middle-aged and older adults, according to researchers from the University of São Paulo Medical School in Brazil.¹³ Of note, instead of using 60% of the daily caloric intake of ultraprocessed food as high consumption, this study defined high consumption as “more than 20%.”¹⁴

If a person ate double or triple that amount – as many do – would the rate of cognitive decline be greater? The study didn’t test this, but the outcome doesn’t look good. “These findings support current public health recommendations on limiting ultraprocessed food consumption because of their potential harm to cognitive function.”¹⁵

Also intriguing, eating healthy may be able to offset some of the adverse effects of ultraprocessed foods. The Brazilian researchers found that eating a diet based on whole foods reduced risk of dementia linked to consuming ultraprocessed foods.¹⁶

Similarly, over a 10-year follow-up period, consumption of ultraprocessed food was associated with an increased risk of dementia and vascular dementia.¹⁷ But 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.

Ultraprocessed Foods Pave the Way for Chronic Disease

In addition to cognitive decline and depression, eating junk foods is linked to metabolic syndrome, cancer and all-cause mortality.¹⁸ And that’s not all. A systematic review and meta-analysis of 43 observational studies found eating ultraprocessed food is also associated with increased risk of:¹⁹

Being overweight or obese	Depression
Wheezing	Cardiometabolic diseases
Frailty	Irritable bowel syndrome
Functional dyspepsia	Breast cancer

Because they’re created to be high in salt, sugar, unhealthy fat and refined carbohydrates, ultraprocessed foods are also addictive, with parallels found between food addiction and substance addiction. Among food, ultraprocessed varieties are those most often linked to “addictive-like eating.”²⁰

But as intake increases – and persists over years and decades – premature death can result. Among adults aged 30 to 69, one 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 diseases,²¹ among this age group.²²

Further, consuming more ultraprocessed foods is 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:²³

- 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.

The First Step? Cut Out Seed Oils

There are many dangerous additives in ultraprocessed foods. Even contaminants formed during processing or released from packaging may contribute to health problems.²⁴ However, they are also typically loaded with seed oils, also known as vegetable oils, such as corn oil, soybean oil, sunflower oil and canola oil.

Vegetable and seed oils are high in the omega-6 fatty acid linoleic acid (LA).²⁵ 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.²⁶

I believe the primary factor behind many diseases in the Western world relates to the high consumption of LA. When you eliminate ultraprocessed foods from your diet, you also eliminate a major source of LA, which is a significant step toward better health.

And don't fall for the narrative that fake foods — like lab-made plant-based meat and burgers — are good for you. Even though they're being passed off as healthy, these products are heavily processed and qualify as ultraprocessed. Beyond Burger's fake meat patties, for instance, contain 22 ingredients²⁷ — hardly "health" foods.

And while the greatest health gains come from completely overhauling your diet to one focused on whole, fresh foods, you don't have to do it overnight. Small changes can lead to meaningful improvements, especially when you stick with them. Instead of feeling overwhelmed, commit to eating more unprocessed foods – one meal at a time.

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