

Ultraprocessed Food Linked to Early Death

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Eating ultraprocessed foods is a significant cause of premature death, according to researchers with the University of São Paulo in Brazil
- › The study found about 57,000 premature deaths were due to the consumption of ultraprocessed foods in Brazil among 30- to 69-year-olds
- › This amounted to 10.5% of all-cause premature deaths and 21.8% of premature deaths from noncommunicable diseases
- › In Brazilian adults, ultraprocessed foods make up 13% to 21% of total energy intake; 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.
- › If the contribution of ultraprocessed foods to total caloric intake in Brazil were reduced by 10% to 50%, anywhere from 5,900 to 29,300 deaths could be prevented, annually
- › Previous meta-analyses found that the more ultraprocessed foods consumed, the greater the risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer, along with all-cause mortality

Eating ultraprocessed foods is a significant cause of premature death, according to researchers with the University of São Paulo in Brazil.¹ The study is only the latest to find that consuming these synthetic concoctions full of vegetable (seed) oils, sugar and

chemical flavorings, colorings and preservatives is wrecking human health, longevity and well-being.

Previously, meta-analyses found that the more ultraprocessed foods consumed, the greater the risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer, along with all-cause mortality. In addition to their toxic additives and ingredients, ultraprocessed foods may also be harmful due to contaminants formed during processing or released from their packaging.²

But despite the increasingly grave data showing what these foods — if you can call them that — do to your body, sales of ultraprocessed foods have skyrocketed in recent decades. In the U.S. and certain other high-income countries, including Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia, ultraprocessed foods may make up half or more of the total dietary energy consumed.³ This makes their implications for public health — and mortality — alarming.

Ultraprocessed Foods Caused 57,000 Early Deaths in Brazil

In Brazilian adults, ultraprocessed foods make up 13% to 21% of total energy intake. The research team used a risk assessment model along with data on food consumption and mortality to estimate the premature deaths linked to ultraprocessed food intake among adults aged 30 to 69. They noted:⁴

“Ultraprocessed foods (UPFs) are industrial formulations of substances derived from foods (oils, fats, sugars, starch, protein isolates) that contain little or no whole food and are often added with flavors, colors, emulsifiers, and other additives for cosmetic purposes.

The ingredients and processes used in the manufacture of UPFs aim to create low-cost production products that are extremely palatable and convenient and have the potential to replace unprocessed or minimally processed foods and culinary preparations made with these foods.”

The 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,⁵ among this age group.⁶

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.⁷ In Brazil, meanwhile, the study found that if the contribution of ultraprocessed foods to total caloric intake were reduced by 10% to 50%, anywhere from 5,900 to 29,300 deaths could be prevented, annually.⁸

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.⁹ If you’re wondering which ultraprocessed foods are consumed the most in Brazil, they include:¹⁰

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

What Exactly Are Ultraprocessed Foods?

Processed foods, in general, have gotten a bad reputation for the negative health effects they cause. However, there are often misunderstandings about which foods are processed versus ultraprocessed. When green beans are canned, for instance, they become a processed food instead of a whole food. But while canned green beans are inferior to their fresh counterparts, they’re still a far cry from a bag of potato chips or a box of doughnuts — examples of ultraprocessed foods.

To add some continuity to the definitions, there are a number of systems used to classify foods according to processing-related criteria. Although there's some debate over its accuracy,¹¹ 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." It defines food categories this way:¹²

- 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."

The further you get down the food-processing rabbit hole, the worse you can expect the food to be for your health. Time and again, research links ultraprocessed foods to disease and death. A study of 22,985 adults in Italy found those who consumed the most ultraprocessed foods based on the NOVA classification had the highest risk for all-cause and cardiovascular mortality.¹³

"A significant proportion of the higher mortality risk associated with an elevated intake of nutrient poor foods was explained by a high degree of food processing," the study concluded.¹⁴

In another example, men who consumed the most ultraprocessed foods had a 29% higher risk of developing colorectal cancer than those who consumed the least.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

Ultraprocessed Foods Increase Cognitive Decline

It's not surprising that ultraprocessed foods take a toll on your brain health, but you may be surprised at the relatively low amount linked to such harm. Research presented at the 2022 Alzheimer's Association International Conference demonstrated that consuming breakfast cereal, frozen foods and soda could lead to cognitive decline and increase your risk of Alzheimer's disease.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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?

Seed Oils — No. 1 Contributor to Toxicity

Ultraprocessed foods are typically loaded 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 2018.¹⁹ Vegetable and seed oils are high in the omega-6 fatty acid linoleic acid (LA).²⁰

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.²¹

I believe the primary factor behind many diseases in the Western world relates to the high consumption of LA. This is the basis of a book I am currently writing. While many understand the ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acids is very important, it's important to realize that LA damages your body's ability to generate energy in the mitochondria.

Depending on the organ, your mitochondria work better with different kinds of fatty acids. Your brain prefers the omega-3 fatty acids eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA).²² When there are higher amounts of LA than EPA and DHA, it can damage the mitochondria and trigger apoptosis.

In addition to cell damage, your brain is a high-energy consumer. While it makes up only 2% of the body's weight, it uses up to 25% of the energy.²³ This combination of high energy consumption funneled through the mitochondria and damage to the mitochondria by LA may be a key factor in the development of cognitive decline associated with the consumption of ultraprocessed foods. Eliminating ultraprocessed foods and restaurant foods from your diet is essential to keeping your LA intake low.

Fake Foods Are Ultraprocessed

You're probably already aware that junk foods and fast foods are detrimental to your health. However, avoid falling for the hype that fake meat products are good for you — they're the very definition of ultraprocessed foods.

Yet, if you listen to the World Economic Forum (WEF) and its Great Reset allies, they'll warn you that traditional whole food diets are not only unsustainable but environmentally destructive.²⁴ Animal foods in general, and organically produced ones in particular, The Great Resetters claim, must be replaced with produce genetically engineered for high yield and pest resistance, and protein alternatives made from insects, plants and synthetic biology.

Overall, life on earth cannot be sustained, they say, unless we transition to what amounts to an ultraprocessed and highly unnatural diet. The EAT Forum, cofounded by the Wellcome Trust, developed a Planetary Health Diet²⁵ 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. But once tech giants have control of meat, dairy, cereals and oils, they will be the ones profiting from and controlling the food supply.

It's important to realize that plant-based meat alternatives do not contain healthy animal fats. All the fat comes from industrial seed oils like soy and canola oil. They're ultraprocessed foods — the very prescriptions for metabolic disaster. Replacing real meat with fake substitutes, regardless of how they're made, is only going to further exacerbate the rapid decline in health the population has already experienced.

Today Is the Day to Start Eating Better

If you're reading this and feeling concerned that your intake of ultraprocessed foods is too high, today can be the day you start eating better. London-based cardiologist Dr. Aseem Malhotra is among those who warned that poor diet can even increase your risk of dying from COVID-19, by increasing obesity risk, chronic disease and disrupting your gut microbiome.²⁶

In April 2020, he tweeted, "The government and public health England are ignorant and grossly negligent for not telling the public they need to change their diet now."²⁷

But, on a positive note, Malhotra also stated that eating nutritious foods for even one month could help you lose weight, put Type 2 diabetes into remission and improve your health considerably, so you'll have a much better chance of survival should you contract COVID-19²⁸ — plus a better chance of avoiding premature death caused by ultraprocessed food consumption in general.

I recommend adopting a cyclical ketogenic diet, which involves radically limiting carbs (replacing them with healthy fats and moderate amounts of protein) until you're close to or at your ideal weight, ultimately allowing your body to burn fat — not carbohydrates — as its primary fuel. And as mentioned, the fewer ultraprocessed foods you consume, the better your overall health is likely to be.

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