

# Over 70% of Children's Diets Now Consist of Ultraprocessed Foods

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › According to a recent BMJ study, ultraprocessed foods now make up over 60% of Americans' diets. However, children are consuming more, raising serious health concerns among experts due to their high sugar, salt and unhealthy fat content
- › Multiple large-scale studies associate high consumption of ultraprocessed foods in children with an increased risk of obesity, Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular issues. It also has detrimental effects on mental health and cognitive function
- › Ultraprocessed foods disrupt natural hunger cues, alter gut microbiomes, cause inflammation and lead to nutrient deficiencies despite high calorie intake, setting the stage for lifelong health problems
- › Ultraprocessed foods in children's diets leads to increased healthcare costs, reduces academic performance and widens health disparities in vulnerable populations
- › It's important to address this issue using a multi-faceted approach that includes policy changes, education initiatives, food environment improvements and research into healthier whole-food choices

**Ultraprocessed foods – industrial creations made with ingredients like hydrogenated seed oils, high-fructose corn syrup and artificial additives – have infiltrated modern diets at an alarming rate, with dire consequences to children's health.**

Designed to be cheap, convenient and irresistibly tasty, ultraprocessed foods now make up over 60% of calories in American diets, according to a recent study.<sup>1</sup> However, experts believe that in children, this could be as high as 70%<sup>2</sup> – and it comes with a steep price to your child’s well-being.

## **Large-Scale Studies Reveal Alarming Trends in Children’s Diets**

Children are exposed to ultraprocessed foods everywhere – in school cafeterias, vending machines and supermarket shelves. Food companies also spend billions marketing these products directly to children, hooking them on unhealthy eating habits from an early age.

According to recent National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) findings, ultraprocessed foods now account for a staggering 67% of energy intake among American children.<sup>3</sup> These foods are far from nutritionally balanced, and they set the stage for numerous health issues. In a 2023 study published in the British Medical Journal, the researchers said:<sup>4</sup>

*“Ultraprocessed foods usually disproportionately contribute added sugars, sodium, saturated fats and trans fats, and refined carbohydrates to the diet together with low fiber.”*

Researchers are digging deeper into the long-term consequences of this dietary shift, and large-scale studies have now revealed alarming connections between ultraprocessed foods consumption and adverse health outcomes, particularly in children. In a Fox News article, Ilana Muhlstein, a registered dietitian nutritionist, commented, “What we eat defines how our cells work, how our organs work, and we’re seeing a strong decline in mental health and well-being.”<sup>5</sup>

After analyzing data from hundreds of thousands of participants, researchers found a link between higher intake of ultraprocessed foods and increased risk of heart and mental health disorders. Multiple large-scale studies and meta-analyses have also consistently associated high ultraprocessed food intake with increased risks of obesity,

Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and even certain cancers. One comprehensive review stated:

*“Greater exposure to ultraprocessed food was associated with a higher risk of adverse health outcomes, especially cardiometabolic, common mental disorder, and mortality outcomes.”<sup>6</sup>*

These findings prompt urgent calls for action to address the prevalence of ultraprocessed foods in children’s diets. The evidence points to a looming public health crisis if current dietary trends continue unchecked.

## **Ultraprocessed Foods Are Linked to Multiple Health Issues in Children**

Recent studies have uncovered alarming connections between ultraprocessed food consumption and health problems in children. The evidence is clear and consistent across multiple large-scale studies, pointing to a range of adverse outcomes.

For starters, research shows that children who consume more ultraprocessed foods are significantly more likely to be overweight or obese. This increased risk isn’t just a matter of appearance – it sets the stage for numerous other health issues throughout life, such as diabetes.

Type 2 diabetes, once considered an adult disease, is now increasingly diagnosed in children and teens who regularly consume ultraprocessed foods. These products are loaded with processed sugar and artificial sweeteners that cause rapid spikes in blood sugar, forcing the body to produce more insulin. Over time, this leads to insulin resistance and full-blown diabetes.

Cardiovascular health concerns are another major finding from recent studies. In a study published in the JAMA Network journal, researchers found that children who eat excessive amounts of ultraprocessed foods show early signs of heart disease risk

factors, including high blood pressure and abnormal cholesterol levels. These issues, if left unchecked, lead to serious heart problems later in life.<sup>7,8</sup>

*“UPFs [ultraprocessed foods] consumption was positively associated with fasting plasma glucose levels, BMI, waist circumference, and fat mass index and inversely associated with HDL cholesterol concentration. These findings highlight the importance of promoting unprocessed or minimally processed foods and reducing UPF consumption, particularly starting from early ages,” the researchers concluded.<sup>9</sup>*

Equally concerning are the effects on mental health and cognitive function. Studies suggest that high consumption of ultraprocessed foods is linked to increased risk of sleep disorders, depression and anxiety in children. Additionally, there’s growing evidence that these foods negatively affect brain development and learning abilities.<sup>10</sup>

According to the study authors:

*“Examining data from two to four cross sectional designs, we found evidence supporting direct associations between greater exposure to ultraprocessed foods and a higher risk of the prevalence of adverse sleep related outcomes ... as well as anxiety outcomes.*

*We observed similar associations in separate assessments of prevalent combined common mental disorder outcomes across six cross sectional designs and incident depressive outcomes across two cohorts.”<sup>11</sup>*

Long-term mortality risks have also been identified, even though the full impact will not be seen for decades. Research indicates that habits formed in childhood around ultraprocessed food consumption increases the risk of premature death from various causes in adulthood.<sup>12</sup>

## **How Ultraprocessed Foods Harm Children’s Bodies**

Ultraprocessed foods wreak havoc on children’s bodies in multiple ways, disrupting natural processes and setting the stage for long-term health problems. These foods are

designed to be hyper-palatable, often overriding the body's natural hunger and fullness cues. This leads children to eat more than they need, contributing to weight gain and obesity.

One of the most significant impacts occurs in the gut microbiome. Ultraprocessed foods lack the fiber and nutrients that beneficial gut bacteria need to thrive. Instead, they are loaded with additives and preservatives that alter the balance of gut microbes, leading to inflammation and digestive issues. This disruption in gut health has far-reaching effects, influencing everything from immune function to mental health.

The high sugar and refined carbohydrate content of many ultraprocessed foods causes rapid spikes in blood glucose levels,<sup>13</sup> triggering a cascade of hormonal responses, including the release of insulin. Over time, frequent insulin spikes lead to insulin resistance, a precursor to Type 2 diabetes. Your body's cells become less responsive to insulin, making it harder to regulate blood sugar levels effectively.

Inflammation and oxidative stress are two more ways ultraprocessed foods harm children's bodies. The artificial ingredients, unhealthy fats and lack of antioxidants in these foods create an environment of chronic low-grade inflammation. This state of constant inflammation damages cells and tissues throughout your child's body, contributing to a wide range of health problems.<sup>14</sup>

Despite their high calorie content, ultraprocessed foods often lead to nutrient deficiencies.<sup>15</sup> They're typically low in essential vitamins, minerals and other micronutrients that growing bodies need. This paradoxical situation of being overfed yet undernourished sets children up for a range of health issues, from weakened immune systems to poor bone development.

## **The Hidden Toll of Ultraprocessed Foods to Our Society**

The increasing number of children that are being hooked on ultraprocessed foods has led to a looming public health crisis with severe economic and social consequences. For one, healthcare systems are already straining under the weight of diet-related illnesses

in children. Conditions that were once rare in youth now burden medical facilities, driving up healthcare costs.

Children who consume high amounts of ultraprocessed foods also struggle with focus and energy levels in school. This leads to poor academic performance and, ultimately, lower productivity even into adulthood.

In addition, ultraprocessed food consumption widens existing health disparities. Low-income communities often have limited access to fresh, whole foods and rely more heavily on cheap, processed options. Hence, children from low-income families are at a higher risks of obesity, diabetes and other health issues.

The environmental toll of ultraprocessed food production adds another layer to this complex issue. These products require extensive processing, packaging and transportation, contributing significantly to greenhouse gas emissions and plastic exposure and waste.

## **Practical Strategies to Slash Kids' Ultraprocessed Food Intake**

Reducing (with the goal of eliminating) ultraprocessed foods in your children's diet requires a multi-pronged approach. Start by eliminating all seed oils in your pantry, as these are loaded with **linoleic acid (LA)**. This is the most destructive ingredient in our modern diet today, and most ultraprocessed foods contain high amounts of LA.

Another effective strategy is to gradually substitute whole foods for ultraprocessed options. Start by replacing one ultraprocessed snack or meal each week with whole foods, such as swapping out chips for cut vegetables or fresh fruits. This gradual approach helps children adjust to new flavors and textures without feeling overwhelmed.

Involving children in meal planning and preparation is another powerful technique. When kids participate in choosing recipes, shopping for ingredients and cooking meals, they develop a sense of ownership and pride in their food choices.

This involvement increases their willingness to try new, healthier options and builds valuable life skills. Start by letting them help with simple tasks, like washing vegetables or measuring ingredients, then gradually increase their involvement as they grow older.

Mindful eating practices that you can do as a family helps significantly reduce overconsumption of ultraprocessed foods. Encourage eating meals together, without distractions like TV or phones. Teach your children to eat slowly, savor each bite, and listen to their body's hunger and fullness cues. This approach helps avoid mindless snacking and reduces food cravings, allowing them to build a healthy relationship with eating.

Community-based initiatives, such as food assistance benefits from local farmers markets, community gardens, and cooking classes for families, all contribute to a culture of whole food consumption. They increase availability of fresh produce and provide hands-on learning experiences that allow families to make healthier choices.

Technology also offers innovative tools to help educate children and track their eating habits. There are now apps that allow children to scan barcodes and learn about food ingredients in a fun and interactive way. Using digital meal planners and recipe databases make it easier to incorporate more whole foods into daily routines. Some apps even gamify healthy eating, turning nutrition into an engaging challenge for kids.

## **Eliminating Ultraprocessed Foods Is the First Step to Protect Your Children's Future**

The evidence is clear — ultraprocessed foods pose a serious threat to your children's health. These products, designed for convenience and profit, are wreaking havoc on their young bodies and minds, disrupting natural bodily processes, altering gut microbiomes and creating nutrient deficiencies. The societal impact is equally alarming, straining healthcare systems and widening health disparities.

Making changes to the food environment is essential for the long-term health of your children. Through policy changes, education, environmental modifications and

continued research, we will be able to create a comprehensive framework for reducing children's consumption of ultraprocessed foods and promote healthier eating habits that will benefit them throughout their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Remember, every meal is an opportunity to nourish your children's bodies and shape their future. By reducing ultraprocessed food consumption and embracing minimally processed, whole foods, you are significantly contributing to the next generation's well-being.

## Sources and References

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- <sup>1, 6, 10, 11, 12</sup> [BMJ 2024;384:e077310](#)
- <sup>2, 5</sup> [Fox News, October 5, 2024](#)
- <sup>3, 4</sup> [BMJ 2024;385:e078476](#)
- <sup>7, 9</sup> [JAMA Netw Open. 2024 May; 7\(5\): e2411852](#)
- <sup>8</sup> [AJMC, May 17, 2024](#)
- <sup>13</sup> [Nutrients. 2022 Jun; 14\(12\): 2366](#)
- <sup>14, 16</sup> [BMJ 2023;383:e075294](#)
- <sup>15</sup> [Nutrients. 2021 Oct; 13\(10\): 3390](#)