

Lawsuit Alleges Addictive Ultraprocessed Foods Caused Youth's Illnesses

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February 01, 2025

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › A lawsuit alleges that ultraprocessed foods (UPFs), engineered to be addictive like cigarettes, caused a teenager to develop serious health problems like fatty liver disease and Type 2 diabetes
- › UPFs are defined as "industrially produced edible substances" that lack essential nutrients and are loaded with refined ingredients, added sugars and unhealthy fats like linoleic acid
- › These foods disrupt metabolism, gut health and cellular function, increasing the risk of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and chronic inflammation
- › The lawsuit claims that Big Food took a page from Big Tobacco's playbook, using similar tactics to engineer addiction and aggressively market UPFs to children
- › Protect your health by avoiding ultraprocessed foods, learning to read food labels, cooking more often, making healthier food swaps and practicing mindful eating

Imagine a teenager so hooked on processed foods that their health takes a serious nosedive. This isn't a fictional story, but the basis of a lawsuit against major food manufacturers. The lawsuit claims that the teen's struggles with Type 2 diabetes, fatty liver disease and other health problems are a direct result of consuming excessive amounts of ultraprocessed foods.

This case raises important questions for all: could your favorite snacks be harming your health? Are you truly aware of what you're eating? When you explore the world of ultraprocessed foods, their many health risks become apparent. Understanding these risks empowers you to make informed choices for a healthier lifestyle. Because when it comes to your well-being and the well-being of your family, knowledge is power.

A Teenager Takes on Big Food

A teenager from Warrington, Pennsylvania, is taking on some of the biggest names in the food industry. Bryce Martinez, 18, filed a lawsuit against 11 major food manufacturers, claiming their ultraprocessed foods (UPFs) are engineered to be as addictive as cigarettes and caused him to develop serious health problems.¹

Martinez alleges that these companies engaged in "predatory profiteering," deliberately designing and marketing harmful foods to children without warning the public about the dangers.² This lawsuit, described as the "first of its kind," has been two years in the making and could have major implications for the food industry and consumers alike.³

Martinez's lawyer, Rene F. Rocha, believes this case is an important step toward holding food companies accountable for the harm their products cause.⁴ He points out that diseases like those Martinez developed were virtually nonexistent in children before the rise of ultraprocessed foods.⁵

The lawsuit presents evidence from scientific studies showing a direct correlation between the increased availability of these foods and the skyrocketing rates of childhood obesity and other related diseases.⁶

Rocha emphasizes the urgency of the situation, stating, "The scientific consensus that's emerging is saying there's something uniquely harmful about these products and the way that they're marketed to children that needs to stop. Because the science is clear, it's a time for taking action."⁷

Ultraprocessed Foods Are 'Alien to Prior Human Experience'

The lawsuit defines UPFs as "industrially produced edible substances that are imitations of food."⁸ These are essentially former foods that have been broken down into their basic components, chemically modified, combined with additives, and then reassembled using industrial techniques like molding, extrusion and pressurization, the lawsuit explains.⁹

Think of those convenient, ready-to-eat snacks, meals, and drinks that are loaded with refined ingredients, added sugars, unhealthy fats, including seeds oils high in **linoleic acid** (LA), and artificial additives. These are a far cry from minimally processed foods like fruits, vegetables and whole grains, which undergo minimal alterations before we consume them.

The lawsuit argues that UPFs are "alien to prior human experience," inventions of modern industrial technology that contain little to no whole food.¹⁰ It highlights the dramatic increase in the prevalence of these foods since the 1980s, coinciding with a surge in obesity, diabetes and other chronic illnesses.¹¹

Speaking with Children's Health Defense, Dr. Michelle Perro, a pediatrician and author, argued that the food industry employs neuroscientists to design these foods with a precise combination of fats, salt, sugar and flavor enhancers to make them highly addictive, particularly for young people.¹²

She points to studies like the NutriNet-Santé study,¹³ which found a strong link between diets high in ultraprocessed foods and an increased risk of various health problems, including cancer, cardiovascular disease and Type 2 diabetes.¹⁴

Big Food Takes on Big Tobacco's Playbook in Engineering Addiction

The lawsuit draws a chilling parallel between the **tactics of Big Tobacco** and the actions of Big Food. It claims that in the 1980s, major tobacco companies like Phillip Morris and RJ Reynolds acquired prominent food companies, effectively taking over the American food environment.¹⁵ These companies then used their "cigarette playbook" to flood the market with addictive substances aggressively marketed to children and minorities.¹⁶

The lawsuit alleges that UPF formulation strategies were guided by the same tobacco company scientists and the same kind of brain research used to increase the addictiveness of cigarettes.¹⁷ This involved studying how electrical messages are transmitted in the central nervous system to formulate UPF products that "hack" our brains' physiological structures.¹⁸

For example, the lawsuit states that scientists who conducted human electrode tests on nicotine's addictiveness at a secret Phillip Morris laboratory in Germany also consulted with Kraft and General Foods on the development of UPF.¹⁹ These formulation strategies, aimed at driving consumption and maximizing profits, were quickly adopted throughout the UPF industry.²⁰

The lawsuit even claims that the same MRI machines used by researchers to study addiction are used by UPF companies to engineer their products to be even more addictive.²¹ Furthermore, Big Tobacco repurposed its marketing strategies, originally designed to sell cigarettes, to aggressively market UPF to vulnerable groups.²² The lawsuit quotes a Phillip Morris executive boasting, "We've decided to focus our marketing on kids where we know our strength is the greatest."²³

The UPF industry now spends an estimated \$2 billion each year marketing UPF to children.²⁴ These strategies have been incredibly effective, with UPFs now constituting the vast majority of children's diets.²⁵ The lawsuit argues that UPFs meet all the scientific criteria for addiction, triggering compulsive use, psychoactive effects, and strong cravings, just like tobacco products.²⁶

How Processed Foods Affect Your Body

While ultraprocessed foods are convenient and tasty, they lack the essential nutrients your body needs to thrive. A diet lacking in essential vitamins, minerals and fiber leads to deficiencies that impact growth, development and overall health. This manifest in various ways, from weakened immunity and fatigue to impaired cognitive function and mood disorders.

Excessive consumption of **ultraprocessed foods** also wreaks havoc on your metabolism. These foods are often high in refined carbohydrates, added sugars and unhealthy fats, which disrupt your body's ability to regulate blood sugar levels and process fats effectively.

This increases the risk of developing obesity, Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. In fact, research has shown a direct correlation between ultraprocessed food consumption and an increased risk of **cardiovascular, coronary heart and cerebrovascular diseases**.²⁷

Your gut, home to trillions of bacteria, plays a key role in digestion, immunity and mental health. Think of your gut as a garden. A healthy gut is like a garden teeming with diverse plants, all working together to create a thriving ecosystem. Processed foods, however, disrupt this delicate balance, reducing the diversity of your gut bacteria and leading to digestive issues, weakened immunity and mental health issues.²⁸

Further, ultraprocessed foods are linked to chronic inflammation throughout your body. Inflammation is a natural response to injury or infection, but when it becomes chronic, it contributes to a wide range of health problems, including heart disease, cancer and autoimmune diseases. Studies have shown that a diet high in processed foods triggers inflammatory pathways, increasing the risk of these conditions.²⁹

Linoleic Acid in Processed Foods Is a Mitochondrial Poison

The omega-6 fat LA is at the root of many of the negative health effects of processed foods. Since the mid-20th century, the consumption of LA has skyrocketed in Western diets. This dramatic increase coincides with the unprecedented rise in chronic metabolic diseases like obesity and Type 2 diabetes mellitus.³⁰

The primary reason why excess LA is harmful to your health is because it disrupts your cellular powerhouses – the mitochondria. Think of mitochondria as tiny energy factories in your cells that produce adenosine triphosphate (ATP), the essential fuel that keeps your cells running and repairing themselves.

Without energy, your cells can't repair and regenerate themselves. So, the fundamental issue underlying most chronic disease is that your cells are not producing enough energy. Further, when you consume LA, it undergoes various metabolic processes, leading to the formation of bioactive metabolites like oxidized linoleic acid metabolites (OXLAMs) and arachidonic acid (AA).

These metabolites interfere with insulin signaling, a component in maintaining your blood glucose levels. In addition, when you consume high levels of LA, your body produces more proinflammatory eicosanoids, which trigger chronic low-grade inflammation. By fostering an inflammatory environment, excessive LA consumption not only disrupts your metabolic balance but also accelerates the progression toward chronic diseases.

I recommend keeping your LA intake below 5 grams a day. To achieve this, it's best to eliminate seed oils and even fruit-based oils like olive or avocado from your diet, as these are often mixed with less expensive seed oils. Instead, use ghee, butter or beef tallow for cooking. Stay away from ultraprocessed foods, which typically contain high amounts of seed oils.

It's advisable to avoid dining out as well, since most restaurants use seed oils in their cooking, sauces and dressings. Additionally, limit your consumption of chicken and pork, which are typically high in LA.

Practical Tips for Breaking Free from Processed Foods

Taking control of your health starts with becoming an informed consumer. One of the most powerful tools you have is the food label. Learning to decipher the information on food labels helps you make healthier choices. Look for red flags like long ingredient lists with unfamiliar names, artificial additives and vegetable oils. Remember, the fewer ingredients, the better. Ideally, choose whole foods that require no ingredient label at all.

Cooking more often is one of the best ways to reduce your intake of processed foods. Preparing meals at home allows you to control the ingredients and ensure you're using

whole, unprocessed foods. Start with simple recipes using fresh produce and locally sourced grass fed meats and dairy. You might be surprised at how easy and enjoyable it is.

If you're used to eating ultraprocessed foods, making a sudden switch is sometimes challenging. Start by making small, gradual changes. Swap out sugary drinks for water or unsweetened tea. Choose fruit instead of candy for a sweet treat. These small swaps add up to big health benefits over time.

Mindful eating is another powerful tool for making healthier choices. Pay attention to your hunger cues and eat only when you're truly hungry. Slow down and savor each bite, appreciating the flavors and textures of your food. This helps you enjoy your meals and prevents overeating.

Creating a Healthier Food Environment

While individual choices are important, creating a healthier food environment requires collective action. Stricter regulations on the food industry are needed to protect consumers. This includes clearer labeling that makes it easier to understand what's in your food, as well as restrictions on marketing unhealthy foods to children.

Schools also play a role in shaping healthy eating habits. Advocating for nutritious and delicious food options in schools is essential for children's well-being. Parents and communities should work together to influence school food policies and ensure that children have access to the nourishment they need to thrive.

Community initiatives also play a powerful role in promoting access to healthy, affordable food. Supporting local farmers markets, community gardens and food education programs empowers individuals and families to make healthier choices. Ultimately, consumers have the power to influence the food industry. By making informed choices and supporting companies that prioritize health and sustainability, we send a clear message about the kind of food system we want.

Your Health Is in Your Hands

The lawsuit against food manufacturers serves as a wake-up call, highlighting the dangers of ultraprocessed foods. From mitochondrial disruptions to gut health issues and chronic inflammation, the evidence is clear: these foods have a serious impact on your health. But the good news is, we have the power to make a change.

By avoiding ultraprocessed foods, cooking more often, making smart swaps and practicing mindful eating, you break free from the grip of processed foods and take control of your health. Remember, small changes make a big difference. Together, we can create a healthier food environment for ourselves and future generations.

Sources and References

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