

California Moves to Eliminate Ultraprocessed Foods from School Lunches – by 2035

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › California became the first state in the U.S. to ban ultraprocessed foods from public school lunches under the “Real Food, Healthy Kids Act,” but the full phase-out won’t take effect until 2035
- › Ultraprocessed foods – packed with vegetable oils, additives, and refined sugars – are engineered to trigger cravings and disrupt metabolism, contributing to childhood obesity, insulin resistance, and fatty liver disease
- › A study in JAMA Network Open found that preschoolers who ate the most ultraprocessed foods had higher body fat, larger waistlines, elevated blood sugar, and lower levels of protective HDL cholesterol
- › The delayed timeline leaves millions of children unprotected for nearly a decade, underscoring the urgent need for parents to remove ultraprocessed foods and vegetable oils from their homes now
- › You can protect your child’s long-term health by replacing processed snacks with real foods, eliminating vegetable oils, cooking at home, reducing exposure to junk food ads, and teaching kids how to spot marketing tricks

California has made history by becoming the first state in the U.S. to ban ultraprocessed foods from public school lunches. The “Real Food, Healthy Kids Act,” signed into law by Gov. Gavin Newsom on October 8, 2025, will remove industrially altered foods loaded with additives, dyes, and refined fats from school cafeterias by July 1, 2035.¹

This decision follows mounting evidence that ultraprocessed foods – those heavily manufactured with emulsifiers, thickeners, and artificial flavors – are fueling an epidemic of poor health among children. Recent data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that nearly two-thirds of the average U.S. child's daily calories come from these factory-made foods.²

They're engineered for taste, not nutrition, designed to hit what researchers call the "bliss point" – the perfect ratio of sugar, salt, and fat that overrides natural appetite control. This is why your child craves chips or cookies long after feeling full. The consequences are not just temporary weight gain but deep metabolic harm that starts early and compounds with time.

California's action signals a turning point in the national debate over children's nutrition and corporate control of the food supply. The question now is what this means for your family's health – and what steps you can take before 2035 arrives.

California's Real Food Revolution Begins with Schools

California's "Real Food, Healthy Kids Act" represents the first law in the U.S. to define and ban **ultraprocessed foods** (UPFs) from public school lunches. As reported by CNN, the bill requires scientists and public health experts to determine which ingredients and additives are most damaging to children's health.³ These "foods of concern" will then be systematically phased out of school meal programs that serve over 1 billion lunches annually.

- **The law defines what counts as ultraprocessed – and why that matters –** For the first time in U.S. law, UPFs are officially characterized by ingredients such as nonnutritive sweeteners, emulsifiers, stabilizers, thickeners, flavor enhancers, artificial dyes, and high levels of sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats.

These industrially produced ingredients are designed for taste and shelf life, not nutrition. Many of them are linked to metabolic issues, food addiction, and diseases such as **fatty liver** and diabetes.

- **Lawmakers faced heavy resistance from industry lobbyists but still prevailed** – According to Bernadette Del Chiaro of the Environmental Working Group, "Industry always kicks and screams and fights like bloody hell to keep these bills from becoming law," demonstrating how much corporate power is invested in maintaining the current processed food system.⁴

Despite intense lobbying, the bill passed with overwhelming bipartisan support – only one legislator, a Republican from San Diego, voted against it. This unusual unity underscores how deeply parents and communities want change in what children are fed at school.

- **The new law delays protection for nearly a decade** – While California's plan to eliminate ultraprocessed foods from schools is a historic first, the timeline is unacceptably slow. Full removal isn't required until 2035 – meaning an entire generation of children will continue eating the same harmful, additive-laden foods that science already links to obesity, insulin resistance, and fatty liver disease.

Vendors aren't even required to start reporting their use of ultraprocessed ingredients until February 1, 2028, leaving years of unchecked exposure.

Lawmakers framed the delay as a "transition period," but every school lunch served under the old system prolongs the very crisis this law was meant to solve.

- **The move redefines how Americans think about food quality** – The "Real Food, Healthy Kids Act" shifts the national conversation from calorie counts to ingredient integrity. By recognizing that chemical additives and engineered fats drive chronic disease, the law reframes children's nutrition around real, whole foods.

This change helps parents understand that health isn't about eating less – it's about eating real. The reform also lays the groundwork for future bans on dangerous additives already restricted in Europe, such as certain dyes and flavor enhancers.

- **Start feeding real food now** – California's plan will take a decade to unfold, but you don't have to wait to protect your child's health. By eliminating ultraprocessed foods at home – especially those made with seed oils and additives – you align your

family's habits with the future of public health. California's action proves that food reform is possible, but the most meaningful change begins in your own kitchen.

Children's Metabolic Health Declines with Each Bite of Ultraprocessed Food

California's move to remove ultraprocessed foods from school cafeterias could help protect generations to come, considering the significant health risks these products pose to children.

Research shows that ultraprocessed foods don't just contribute to poor nutrition — they alter metabolism at a foundational level, increasing body fat, blood sugar, and early markers of chronic disease. When such foods are served daily in school lunches, they normalize metabolic dysfunction at the very stage of life when healthy habits should be taking root.

- **A major study linked processed food intake to measurable harm in young children's metabolic health** — Research published in JAMA Network Open examined 1,426 preschoolers in Spain, ages 3 to 6, to understand how eating UPFs affects early markers of chronic disease.⁵ Researchers found that children who ate the most UPFs had higher body fat, larger waistlines, and elevated fasting blood sugar compared to those who ate the least.

These same children also had lower levels of HDL cholesterol — the "good" kind that protects arteries. The findings reveal that the damage begins long before adulthood and that your [child's daily snack choices](#) shape their lifelong metabolic trajectory.

- **The more ultraprocessed food children ate, the worse their metabolic scores became** — Every increase in UPF intake correlated with measurable changes in fat storage and blood sugar control. Replacing 100 grams of ultraprocessed food with 100 grams of real, unprocessed food lowered body mass index, fat mass, and glucose levels — all without counting calories or restricting food.

- **Unhealthy habits begin early and compound over time** – Early eating patterns strongly predict later health outcomes. Preschoolers who consumed the most UPFs were more likely to have mothers who were overweight, younger, and had lower education levels. This link highlights how marketing, accessibility, and cost steer families toward **convenience foods**.

Once these habits take hold, they persist into adolescence and adulthood, increasing the risk of heart disease, **diabetes**, and obesity later in life. For parents, this finding reinforces the importance of setting a strong foundation early – what your child eats at age 5 echoes through decades of health.

- **The study revealed a direct connection between ultraprocessed food intake and blood sugar imbalance** – Fasting glucose levels – a key marker of how efficiently the body uses insulin – were higher among children who ate the most UPFs. Elevated glucose means your body is struggling to regulate sugar, setting the stage for **insulin resistance**.

Over time, this imbalance often progresses into metabolic syndrome, a condition marked by high blood sugar, high triglycerides, and increased waist circumference. Even though these preschoolers were years away from adult diseases, their metabolic profiles already reflected risk.

- **Ultraprocessed foods disrupt your body's natural regulatory systems** – UPF's combination of refined carbohydrates, industrial fats, and chemical additives interferes with satiety signals and blood sugar stability. Additives like emulsifiers and flavor enhancers also disturb your **gut microbiome**, which plays a central role in metabolism and immune function.

When these bacteria are thrown off balance, **inflammation** increases, making it harder for your child's body to process nutrients efficiently. Over time, this internal chaos contributes to energy crashes, mood swings, and chronic inflammation.

The simulation model in the study found that replacing just one serving of ultraprocessed food – roughly the size of a snack bag or sweetened yogurt – with an equal serving of real food lowered fasting glucose and fat levels. This means you don't have to overhaul your entire pantry overnight. Simply swapping one ultraprocessed snack for a whole-food option each day – like fruit, grass fed cheese, or a hard-boiled egg – creates measurable metabolic improvement.

How to Protect Your Family from the Hidden Dangers of Ultraprocessed Foods

If you're waiting for schools to serve truly healthy lunches, don't. You have far more control at home than any policy can provide. The habits your child builds now – what they eat, crave, and reach for – will shape their lifelong relationship with food. The key is to outsmart the powerful marketing and metabolic traps that drive processed food addiction and start rewiring their appetite from the inside out. Here's how to get started:

1. Rebuild your child's plate – and their metabolism – by avoiding vegetable oils –

Start by cleaning up what's on the table. Cut out ultraprocessed foods, especially anything made with vegetable oils like soybean, corn, safflower, sunflower, or canola. These are loaded with **linoleic acid** (LA), a polyunsaturated fat that damages your mitochondria – the part of your cells responsible for producing energy.

Over time, excess LA disrupts metabolism and fuels inflammation. Replace those oils with stable, nourishing fats such as grass fed butter, ghee, or tallow. Aim to keep daily LA intake under 5 grams, ideally closer to 2 grams. When my **Mercola Health Coach app** launches, the Seed Oil Sleuth feature will help you track this down to the tenth of a gram.

2. Make cooking a shared experience – If your child is old enough, get them involved in preparing meals. Let them wash vegetables, stir homemade sauces, or choose which herbs to add. The more they connect with real food, the more ownership they feel.

Cooking together isn't just about nutrition – it teaches awareness, confidence, and curiosity about what fuels their body. You'll notice that once they understand where food comes from, they're less drawn to what comes out of a package. You can even plant a family [vegetable garden](#) to grow your own food for healthy meals.

- 3. Break the screen-to-snack link – [Junk food advertising](#)** works by hijacking your child's natural hunger cues and replacing them with brand-driven cravings. If they're watching TV or scrolling social media around mealtimes, they're being conditioned to eat when they see certain colors, jingles, or logos. Reduce screen time before and during meals to break that link. Encourage movement or creative play instead – it keeps their mind active and their appetite natural.
- 4. Teach your child how to outsmart food marketing** – Keep your home free from visual triggers that subconsciously drive snacking. Throw out branded boxes, bags, and wrappers, and store healthy foods in clear, unmarked containers. This simple shift removes the constant visual reminders that encourage overeating. Out of sight really does mean out of mind – especially for kids learning to regulate their impulses.

Explain how advertisers use colors, mascots, and emotional stories to trick them into wanting products that aren't actually food. Once they understand the manipulation, they start seeing through it. Spot the ad tricks together when they watch a show or scroll online. When they recognize the manipulation, they reclaim their power of choice.

- 5. Make healthy options easy and inviting** – Create a "grab-and-go" zone in your kitchen filled with ready-to-eat real foods – cut fruit, grass fed cheese cubes, hard-boiled eggs, or sliced veggies with dip. Keep these visible and within reach. When hunger or an ad-trigger strikes, your child will have better options right in front of them. This small change rewires behavior effortlessly – because the easiest choice becomes the healthiest one.

When you remove junk food influences and replace them with real nourishment, you're not just protecting your child's body — you're rebuilding their self-control, energy, and long-term health from the inside out. Every small choice compounds into lifelong resilience.

FAQs About California's Ban on Ultraprocessed Foods in School Lunches

Q: What does California's new law actually do?

A: California's "Real Food, Healthy Kids Act" bans UPFs from public school lunches. Signed into law on October 8, 2025, it directs health experts to identify the worst additives and ingredients — such as artificial dyes, emulsifiers, and vegetable oils — and mandates their removal from school meal programs by July 1, 2035. The law's goal is to replace industrially engineered foods with real, minimally processed ingredients across all public schools.

Q: Why is the 2035 deadline a problem?

A: The timeline gives food vendors nearly a decade to comply, leaving millions of children exposed to harmful, additive-filled meals during their most vulnerable years of development. Science already links ultraprocessed foods to obesity, insulin resistance, and fatty liver disease, yet reporting requirements don't even begin until February 1, 2028. Each school lunch served under current conditions continues to damage children's metabolic health.

Q: What makes ultraprocessed foods so harmful?

A: UPFs are designed for taste, not nourishment. They're filled with vegetable oils high in LA and chemical additives that disrupt metabolism and gut health. Research published in JAMA Network Open found that preschoolers who consumed the most UPFs had higher body fat, greater waist circumference, elevated blood sugar, and lower "good" HDL cholesterol.⁶ These early metabolic imbalances pave the way for obesity, diabetes, and heart disease later in life.

Q: How do food advertisements influence children's cravings?

A: Junk food marketing rewires your brain's reward system. By pairing bright colors, logos, and jingles with hyperpalatable foods, advertisers teach children to crave brands instead of real food. This conditioning overrides natural hunger signals, making it nearly impossible for kids to stop eating once they start. Reducing screen time around meals and removing branded packaging from your home helps break this loop.

Q: What steps can parents take right now to protect their kids?

A: You don't have to wait until 2035 to make a change. Start by eliminating foods that contain vegetable oils – like soybean, corn, safflower, sunflower, or canola – and replace them with stable fats such as grass fed butter, ghee, or tallow.

Cook more meals at home, involve your kids in food prep, and teach them how marketing manipulates their choices. Keep ready-to-eat real foods – like fruit, grass fed cheese cubes, and hard-boiled eggs – visible and easy to grab. Small daily choices rebuild metabolism, reduce inflammation, and teach lifelong self-control.

Sources and References

- ^{1, 3, 4} [CNN October 10, 2025](#)
- ² [U.S. CDC, August 2025, NCHS Data Brief No. 536](#)

- ^{5, 6} JAMA Netw Open. 2024 May 17;7(5):e2411852