

Ultraprocessed Foods Linked to 4 in 10 Cardiovascular Deaths and Increased Mortality Risk

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Nearly 38% of cardiovascular deaths in Canada are linked to ultraprocessed foods. These products contribute to 96,000 new heart disease cases and 17,400 deaths each year
- › Eating just one additional daily serving of ultraprocessed food raises your risk of obesity by 7%, abdominal fat by 5%, and Type 2 diabetes by 12%
- › Ultraprocessed foods increase cognitive decline risk by 16% and stroke risk by 8%, with the strongest effects seen in Black participants
- › Processed meat products like hot dogs and deli meats are linked to a 43% higher risk of death from neurodegenerative diseases and a 13% higher all-cause mortality risk
- › Even small amounts of ultraprocessed food trigger inflammation, oxidative stress, and mitochondrial dysfunction that accelerate aging and drain your energy daily

Ultraprocessed foods dominate grocery store shelves today in the form of frozen dinners, packaged snacks, and fast-food items. While they offer convenience, they are engineered to hijack your appetite and flood your system with harmful compounds. These products, stripped of real nutrition and loaded with additives, trans fats, and artificial ingredients, are slowly clogging your arteries and setting you up for a heart attack or stroke.

According to a study, nearly 38% of all cardiovascular disease deaths in Canada are directly linked to ultraprocessed food consumption. That means over 17,400 Canadian lives are lost each year because of food choices that seem harmless but are quietly destroying your heart and arteries.

But it goes beyond heart disease – ultraprocessed foods damage your overall health, worsening your metabolic function, increasing inflammation, and compromising gut function. Every single packaged snack or sugary drink you consume adds up, leading you toward obesity, diabetes, neurodegenerative diseases, and even early death.

Canadian Study Points to Ultraprocessed Foods as a Massive Cause of Heart Disease

An analysis from the Department of Nutrition at the University of Montreal, commissioned by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, set out to measure how much of Canada's heart disease and stroke burden is driven by ultraprocessed foods. They used national health data to model the impact of these foods on adults over age 20.¹

- **The research identified high numbers of deaths and disability tied to processed food intake** – The team linked food intake data from the Canadian Community Health Survey to new cases of cardiovascular disease, deaths from heart disease and stroke, and years of life lost or spent disabled.
- **Ultraprocessed foods cause nearly 100,000 cases of heart disease annually** – In 2019 alone, ultraprocessed foods contributed to 96,043 cases of cardiovascular disease, 17,417 deaths, and nearly 389,000 years of life lost or spent living with chronic heart-related conditions.
- **Over one-third of heart disease deaths came from eating ultraprocessed foods** – The study, a first of its kind,² was modeled using real national health data and validated risk models, not guesses or projections.

- **Reducing ultraprocessed food consumption could save thousands of lives each year** – According to the authors, if Canadians cut their intake of these foods by 50%, there would be 45,914 fewer new cardiovascular disease cases annually. It would also save 8,314 lives every single year.
- **Men are hit hardest by ultraprocessed food-related heart problems** – The highest levels of processed food consumption were seen in young men aged 20 to 24 and adults over 80. Unsurprisingly, the study found that 61% of new heart disease and stroke cases connected to these foods occurred in men. Additionally, men accounted for 52% of the related deaths.
- **The damage builds up from youth and compounds with age** – Poor eating habits create health problems later, with symptoms like high blood pressure, fatigue, and shortness of breath appearing when damage is already underway.

Ultraprocessed foods are engineered to make you overeat. These foods are packed with industrial ingredients like refined sugars, trans fats, and chemicals designed to override your fullness signals. The result? Overeating, weight gain, and chronic inflammation, which damage your artery walls and raise your blood clot risk.

Your Brain Also Suffers When You Eat Ultraprocessed Foods

The featured study adds to the growing evidence associating ultraprocessed food with adverse health outcomes. Another study published in *Neurology*³ also points out how these products damage brain function and increase the likelihood of stroke.

Focusing on cognitive decline and stroke risk in adults across the U.S., researchers from Harvard Medical School, Massachusetts General Hospital, Yale School of Medicine, and University of Alabama at Birmingham⁴ used data from the REasons for Geographic and Racial Differences in Stroke study (REGARDS), tracking both Black and White adults over time.

- **The study found sharp increases in risk** – More than 14,000 adults without cognitive impairment and over 20,000 adults without prior strokes were tracked for years. The researchers found that for every 10% increase in ultraprocessed food consumption, cognitive impairment risk jumped by 16%, and stroke risk rose by 8%.

The study found that the relationship between ultraprocessed food intake and stroke risk was strongest in Black participants.

- **Cognitive decline was tracked over several years through measurable tests** – The participants were observed from 2003 to 2007; they repeatedly underwent testing as well. Researchers used memory and verbal fluency tests to monitor changes, and found that participants who ate the most ultraprocessed foods scored worse over time. They showed increasing forgetfulness and trouble recalling simple words.
- **The participants who consumed the least processed food had better brain health** – Prioritizing whole foods like fresh fruits and vegetables maintained stronger memory and mental sharpness throughout the study. This means swapping processed foods for simple, home-cooked meals could preserve your cognitive health for decades.

This shows that even relatively modest yet healthy changes in your diet will have a significant impact on your brain health. According to Dr. W. Taylor Kimberly, a neurologist at Massachusetts General Hospital and the study's senior study author:⁵

"What you're talking about is one or two meals a week. If you can exchange that from an ultraprocessed meal to an unprocessed food or meal, that is associated with a measurable reduction in the risk of stroke or cognitive impairment. It's not only what we eat that matters, but how the food is processed before we eat it."

Study Looked at How Different Types of Ultraprocessed Foods Lead to Higher Mortality Risk

Another research published in the British Medical Journal (BMJ)⁶ examined how different varieties of ultraprocessed foods affect your risk of death from all causes over time. The study used data from two massive U.S. cohort studies – the Nurses' Health Study and the Health Professionals Follow-up Study. More than 74,000 women and nearly 40,000 men were tracked for up to 34 years, all starting without cancer, heart disease, or diabetes.

- **Higher ultraprocessed food consumption meant a clear increase in early death** – The participants were healthy adults at the start, but those eating the highest amounts of ultraprocessed foods faced a 4% higher risk of dying from any cause compared to those who consumed the least.
- **Processed meat products were the biggest culprits** – Hot dogs, sausages, and deli meats were linked to a staggering 43% higher risk of death from neurodegenerative diseases, and a 13% higher risk of dying from all causes.
- **The numbers show population-wide impact** – In the highest quarter of consumption, the mortality rate reached 1,536 deaths per 100,000 persons each year, compared to 1,472 in the lowest quarter. Though the difference may look small on paper, over time this translates into tens of thousands of preventable deaths.
- **Switching to diet drinks is not a safe option** – The study revealed that sugar-sweetened and artificially sweetened beverages were almost equally harmful, with hazard ratios of 1.09 and 1.08, respectively. In other words, **swapping regular soda for diet versions** still disrupts your metabolism and spikes insulin, leading to fat gain and metabolic dysfunction – even without calories.

Ultraprocessed products trigger systemic inflammation, harming the cells lining your arteries and upsetting hormonal balance. They also increase free radicals in your body, which are unstable molecules that damage your cells, DNA, and membranes. Over time, oxidative stress speeds up aging, weakens immunity, and makes you more vulnerable to chronic disease and infections.

The research found that even participants with high overall diet quality, measured by the Alternative Healthy Eating Index, still experienced higher mortality if they consumed ultraprocessed foods. This means you cannot offset the damage – the key is to completely eliminate these products from your diet.

Ultraprocessed Foods Are Associated with 32 Adverse Health Effects

An umbrella review, also published in the BMJ,⁷ combined data from 45 pooled analyses, covering almost 10 million people worldwide. The research included adults and children, looking at different adverse health parameters and how ultraprocessed foods directly contribute to these health risks.

The researchers found that 32 out of 45 analyses (71%) confirmed a strong link between consuming these foods and 32 adverse health outcomes, including mental health disorders, respiratory diseases, digestive issues, metabolic problems, and [cancer](#).⁸

- **Certain groups faced higher risks than others** – Adults aged 30 to 50 were most affected long-term, but the danger was evident across all ages. Children and teens who ate more ultraprocessed foods had higher rates of wheezing and breathing problems, while seniors faced accelerated health declines.
- **The most dangerous outcomes were early death and chronic disease** – For every 10% increase in ultraprocessed food consumption, there was a 12% higher risk of developing Type 2 diabetes and a 21% higher chance of dying from any cause. Meanwhile, cardiovascular death rates surged by 50% among those with the highest intake compared to the lowest.
- **Mental health issues also skyrocketed with higher consumption** – Those who consumed more ultraprocessed foods were 48% more likely to suffer from anxiety and 53% more likely to experience depression and other mood disorders. Sleep problems were also common.

- **Even small daily increases in ultraprocessed foods added up quickly** – Every additional serving increased obesity risk by up to 7%, abdominal obesity by 5%, and Type 2 diabetes by 12%. If weight and metabolism are already concerns for you, these foods are quietly making things worse.
- **All types of ultraprocessed foods carried risks, but some were worse** – The worst offenders were ready-to-eat meat products – processed meat products drove death rates up by as much as 43%. Frozen dinners and sugary drinks also led to severe effects. Even foods like dairy-based desserts and packaged savory snacks contributed to respiratory and cognitive problems.
- **The biological damage begins with gut disruption and chronic inflammation** – Chemical additives, including emulsifiers and artificial sweeteners, harm the gut microbiome, sparking inflammation throughout the body. This damages arteries, weakens immunity, and raises the risk of blood clots and arterial plaques.

Processed food consumption also floods the body with free radicals, which harm DNA and weaken cell membranes. Over time, this accelerates aging, mental decline, and heart disease.

The research proved that moderate but consistent exposure builds up year after year, undermining your health and accelerating aging and disease. Every processed snack, soda, or frozen meal adds to that cumulative harm.

Eliminate Ultraprocessed Foods Now to Protect Your Overall Health

If you're feeling tired, foggy, or noticing small signs like forgetfulness, shortness of breath, or weight gain, your daily food choices are the first place to look. All the studies featured above make it clear that ultraprocessed foods are not harmless; they are directly contributing to heart disease, stroke, memory decline, and even early death.

The good news is that you have control – the solution is to change your diet habits, one step at a time. Here's what I recommend you do right now to help reverse the damage and protect your body:

1. Clear your kitchen of ultraprocessed foods – Go through your pantry and fridge and toss out packaged snacks, sugary beverages, frozen dinners, deli meats, and breakfast bars – even if they say "organic" or "low-fat."

If you're unsure whether it's ultraprocessed or not, ask yourself – is this made with ingredients I wouldn't cook with at home? If the answer is yes, it needs to go. Removing temptation makes it easier for you to succeed without relying on willpower alone.

2. Switch to whole foods as the foundation of every meal – If you're someone who loves convenience, you need easy, go-to replacements. Focus on simple foods like eggs, grass fed beef, wild-caught fish, fresh fruits, well-cooked vegetables, root vegetables, and white rice if your gut tolerates it. Always aim for minimally processed foods that are recognizable.

3. Ditch sodas and artificially sweetened beverages completely – If you're someone who loves flavored drinks, make your own fruit-infused water with lemon, berries, or cucumber.

4. Plan your snacks and meals – One of the biggest reasons people fall back into bad habits is lack of preparation. Planning your meals will save your health – Pre-cut vegetables, boil eggs, batch-cook meats, and have fruit ready to grab. If you're someone who travels a lot, pack your own food. Trust me, nothing derails your progress faster than hunger and no options.

5. Track your energy and brain clarity daily – Make it a habit to check in with yourself every morning and evening. How's your focus? Do you feel energized or sluggish? Write it down. If you're someone who likes structure, turn it into a challenge for 30

days. The more you track, the more you'll notice how much removing ultraprocessed foods is improving your life. Watching that progress builds confidence and keeps you moving forward.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Ultraprocessed Foods

Q: How do ultraprocessed foods affect my heart health?

A: Ultraprocessed foods cause chronic inflammation, raise blood pressure, and damage arteries. One study found that these products contribute to 38% of heart disease deaths and nearly 100,000 new cases annually in Canada.

Q: Do ultraprocessed foods harm my brain?

A: Yes. Research shows a 16% higher risk of cognitive impairment and an 8% increased risk of stroke for every 10% increase in ultraprocessed food consumption, especially impacting memory and focus.

Q: Which ultraprocessed foods are the most dangerous?

A: Processed meat products like hot dogs, sausages, and deli meats carry the highest risk, raising the chance of neurodegenerative death by 43% and all-cause mortality by 13%.

Q: Is it OK to consume diet sodas or artificially sweetened drinks?

A: No. Both sugar-sweetened and artificially sweetened beverages are equally harmful, disrupting metabolism, increasing insulin resistance, and raising your risk of chronic disease.

Q: What's the best way to reduce the damage from ultraprocessed foods?

A: Clear your kitchen, switch to whole foods, plan meals, eliminate sodas, and track your energy and mental clarity daily to reverse the damage and protect your health.

Sources and References

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