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Experts Warn Ultraprocessed Foods Pose a Major Global Health Threat — Here's How to Cut Back

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | January 12, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Big Food now supplies over half of U.S. adults' at-home calories through ultraprocessed foods and, according to a study in The Lancet, these foods are now a major global health threat driving chronic disease
- The NOVA food classification groups foods by processing. Group 4 (ultraprocessed products) are industrial formulations that displace healthy diets and seriously harm health
- Across 104 studies, higher ultraprocessed food intake was consistently linked to poorer metabolic health, faster weight gain, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and long-term exposure to harmful additives and endocrine-disrupting chemicals
- Most governments rely on weak, nutrient-focused policies and voluntary programs, while industry interference and trade challenges block stronger rules that reduce availability, marketing, and additives in ultraprocessed foods
- Transnational food giants shape laws, research, and public opinion to protect profits, so personal control starts with awareness, cleaning your pantry, smarter swaps, limiting vegetable oils, and strong social support

Big Food has steadily gained consumers over real, whole food. In a 2024 analysis published by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, "more than half of calories consumed at home by adults in the U.S. come from ultraprocessed foods."[1] This

is one of the most concerning findings when it comes to public health, as these products have been extensively linked to rising rates of chronic disease.[2]

In a three-part series published in The Lancet, researchers sounded the alarm on how ultraprocessed foods are becoming a "major health threat."[3] But before going into that, it's important to define what "ultraprocessed" means.

What Are Ultraprocessed Foods?

In 2009, epidemiologist Carlos Monteiro (who also co-wrote the first part of the featured Lancet study) and his research team came up with the NOVA classification system, which categorizes food into four groups based on their level of processing, not their nutritional content.[4] This was spurred by the fact that in Monteiro's native Brazil, obesity was once believed to be a problem of wealthy people, since they could buy all the food they want.

However, obesity rates started to climb from all income brackets in Brazil, which necessitated a different way of thinking to combat the growing problem.[5] Here are the four groups:[6]

- **Group 1 (unprocessed and minimally processed foods) —** These are foods at their purest form. Plants as well as animal products are included here. Examples include fruit, vegetables, meat, mushrooms, eggs, and milk.

- **Group 2 (processed culinary ingredients) —** These include common cooking ingredients such as butter, lard, sugar, and salt. They are typically minimally processed using techniques such as pressing, grinding, milling, and drying.

- **Group 3 (processed foods) —** These refer to products that contain a mixture of processing and natural food, such as canned fruit preserved in syrup or fish preserved in oil. While the goal with group 3 is to increase shelf life of group 1 ingredients, the issue is that manufacturing is now done on an industrial scale.

- **Group 4 (ultraprocessed foods) —** Products that belong in this category are basically lab-made concoctions. They are "formulations of ingredients, mostly of exclusive industrial use, typically created by series of industrial techniques and processes (hence 'ultraprocessed')."

  Common examples of ultraprocessed foods include soft drinks, candies, mass-produced bread, margarine, pre-prepared meats, hotdogs, and instant noodles.

According to Priscilla Machado, Ph.D., co-author of The Lancet study series, products belonging under group 4 pose the biggest threat to public health. "There is well-established evidence that ultra-processed foods are displacing healthy diets and harming health globally," she said.[7]

What Does the Latest Research Say About Health Risks?

The first part of the study sets out to answer a simple but important question — what happens inside your body, your daily diet, and your long-term health when ultraprocessed foods take over your plate? For the analysis, the authors gathered evidence from 104 studies around the world.[8]

- **The results showed a clear pattern —** Populations with the highest intake of these products consistently show the poorest metabolic and overall health outcomes. According to Monteiro and his team, the trend is not limited to one demographic group — it shows up in teenagers, adults, and older individuals, and it appears across different cultures and income levels.

  The findings reveal that the more ultraprocessed food someone eats, the worse their diet quality becomes and the higher their risk for conditions such as obesity, Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer.

- **How quickly ultraprocessed foods reshape eating habits —** The study noted that these products "are globally displacing long-established diets centred on whole foods and their culinary preparation as dishes and meals."[9]

Once ultraprocessed products enter a food system, traditional cooking declines and families start relying on ready-to-eat, ready-to-heat, or grab-and-go meals. While this approach saves time, your health will ultimately suffer.

- **Ultraprocessed foods also alter how much you eat —** The paper explains that these products are designed for "hyper-palatability," which causes you to eat more and in larger amounts. That kind of eating pattern destabilizes your energy production by overwhelming your digestive system with refined ingredients.

- **A look at the long-term damage to your health —** Observational data across multiple long-term cohorts demonstrate that people with the highest exposure to ultraprocessed foods show measurable harm over years of follow-up, not just immediately. The researchers summarize that higher intake of these foods aligns with more rapid weight gain and a higher likelihood of developing diet-related chronic diseases over time.

- **Assessing the elements of ultraprocessed foods —** The paper touched on several crucial aspects of ultraprocessed foods that ultimately affect your health — nutritional imbalance, excess calorie intake, lower levels of protective compounds, and consumption of xenobiotics, which include endocrine disruptors such as phthalates.

Why Are Experts Urging Action Now?

The second paper in the series set out to understand which policies around the world can actually reduce ultraprocessed food consumption, and why most attempts fall short. The researchers examined existing national regulations, international frameworks, voluntary programs, and industry-backed initiatives to determine how different governments attempt to shape food supply, food environments, and consumer behavior.[10]

- **Governments are bowing down to corporations —** The research revealed that despite clear evidence of harm from ultraprocessed foods, most governments rely on narrow or weak strategies, such as voluntary reformulation or general education campaigns.

  These approaches leave you largely unprotected, because they do not change the availability, price, or aggressive marketing that drives you toward ultraprocessed foods in the first place. The findings show that stronger structural policies — not personal responsibility messages — are what shift actual eating habits.

- **Most national policies focus on nutrients rather than processing level —** The authors explain that current rules mainly target sugar, sodium, or partly hydrogenated oils, which allows companies to tweak ingredients without changing the underlying product design. That means a snack loaded with emulsifiers, artificial flavors, and engineered textures still reaches store shelves when the salt or sugar number fits a guideline.

- **Countries have made little progress in regulating ultraprocessed-specific additives —** Sweeteners, emulsifiers, and colorants remain widely permitted despite growing evidence that combined exposure to these chemical mixtures affects human physiology. Restricting these ingredients would directly target the features that make ultraprocessed foods so damaging to your body, yet most governments avoid this step.

- **A tougher stance creates noticeable results —** Nations that introduced stronger measures, such as front-of-package warning labels or sugary drink taxes, saw changes in product sales and consumer choices within a relatively short window, often a few years. The shifts occurred not because people suddenly wanted healthier food but because the food environment itself changed.

  Factors such as price, visibility, and labeling influence daily decisions far more than nutrition lectures, which explains why personal willpower rarely beats the sheer convenience and promotion of ultraprocessed foods.

- **Multifaceted methods work best —** Some of the largest benefits were observed in countries that used a combination of policies rather than isolated measures. The research noted that when governments combine marketing restrictions, fiscal tools, and strong front-of-package warnings, the food landscape shifts rapidly — healthier foods become cheaper and easier to access, while ultraprocessed options lose their dominance.

- **The comparison between different policy types —** Policies that reshape the food environment, such as restrictions on advertising to children, public procurement standards, and pricing strategies have far greater impact than education programs or voluntary guidelines supported by industry.

  This means that health outcomes improve when the rules governing supermarkets, schools, and supply chains change, not when the burden is pushed onto the public through campaigns about better choices. That's because, again, consumers will largely favor the convenient option. However, structural changes can mitigate the impact.

- **Mechanisms behind policy failure —** One major barrier is industry interference. According to the paper, transnational food corporations actively lobby against stricter regulations, fund research framed to cast doubt on ultraprocessed food harms, and use trade agreements to challenge national policies they view as threats to profit. This interference shapes the food system you live in long before any government can put protective measures in place.

- **Big Food keeps searching for loopholes —** The study highlights regulatory blind spots created by focusing on individual ingredients rather than the whole system of processing.

  When governments regulate isolated components, companies shift to new formulations rather than new food categories. This keeps ultraprocessed foods dominant while giving the illusion of progress. For example, efforts to reduce sugar

in ultraprocessed foods led to a 15% increase in non-nutritive sweeteners in children.[11]

How Does Big Food Push Ultraprocessed Foods Onto Consumers?

The third paper in this series investigated how Big Food influences laws, public opinion, and scientific debates to keep ultraprocessed foods firmly embedded in the public's daily diet.[12]

A broad array of populations, government bodies, advocacy groups, and multinational corporations were included in this analysis. The researchers did not examine individuals with specific diseases — instead, they explored how industry behavior affects entire societies. The findings show that the strategies used by companies selling ultraprocessed foods are far beyond marketing. They influence what governments regulate, what the public believes, and even what researchers feel safe publishing.

- **The way transnational food companies concentrate their power —** According to the researchers, a handful of global firms dominate the production and distribution of ultraprocessed foods across continents. This concentration gives them enormous leverage over trade rules, agricultural supply chains, packaging systems, and retail standards.

  When a company controls large portions of a global supply chain, it gains the ability to pressure governments, block unfavorable regulations, and set the norms that shape what appears on store shelves. In other words, a large portion of the public's food choices are designed around corporate profit rather than biological well-being.

- **Political influence is used to great effect —** Corporations fund lobbying networks, sponsor public-private partnerships, and finance research that supports their commercial agendas. Companies also leverage their impact on the economy to get what they want. "[L]obbyists can influence government policy decisions by threatening to relocate jobs, investments, or input sourcing," the researchers noted.

- **How companies influence global policy systems —** Food corporations invoke international trade and investment agreements to challenge national regulations they dislike. This tactic has been used to argue that front-of-pack warning labels or advertising restrictions violate trade rules. They also use their near unlimited resources to fund their legal strategies:[13]

  > *"In Mexico, the industry filed 50 legal injunctions to delay a front-of-pack warning label regulation, claiming violations of advertising freedoms of expression and intellectual property rights."*

- **The use of soft power —** This refers to subtle strategies that shape public perception rather than direct policy. Companies sponsor community programs, fund sports events, donate to health charities, and form alliances with influential institutions.

  These actions create an image of social responsibility while distracting from the health harms associated with their products. When a company's logo appears on school events, nutrition programs, or academic conferences, it becomes easier for the public to trust the brand and harder for policymakers to introduce measures that restrict its products.

- **Groups that experience the biggest impacts from these corporate strategies —** Low- and middle-income countries undergoing rapid economic changes are heavily targeted by aggressive ultraprocessed food expansions. These regions become prime markets for companies looking to replace traditional diets with branded packaged foods. Once a country becomes dependent on these products, reversing the trend becomes exponentially harder.

- **A comparison of different forms of corporate influence and how they interact —** The researchers noted that political lobbying, marketing power, and scientific influence reinforce each other, forming a system where the industry maintains control across multiple levels.

For example, the same company that lobbies against taxes on sugary drinks might also fund research that questions their harms and sponsor campaigns that portray these products as sources of energy or happiness. When these strategies operate together, they create a powerful shield against government regulations.

- **How the public can regain control of their health —** While it seems that there's no hope against Big Food's machinations, there are ways to counter their tactics.

  The researchers noted that educating the public about the dangers of ultraprocessed food needs to continue, starting with grassroots campaigns, then moving on to media engagement. Bringing together like-minded politicians, journalists, academic advocates, health professionals, lawyers, and civil society organizations have also proven to be effective in changing policies around consumption of ultraprocessed foods.

How Can I Reduce Ultraprocessed Foods Today?

Ultraprocessed foods have been woven into nearly every facet of the modern food system, and most people don't realize how much they dominate our diets. Supermarkets are even intentionally arranged to funnel you toward purchasing these items, and major food manufacturers pour billions into marketing to keep them irresistible.

But once you become aware of the tactics used to trick your mind, it becomes easier to say no and turn to healthy food. With this in mind, these steps can help you break free:

1. **Evaluate your purchases and switch to healthier choices —** Start by clearing out your pantry, because whatever sits in it subconsciously steers your daily eating habits.

   Clear out the usual grab-and-go offenders like potato chips, crackers, packaged chocolate bars, and candy, and restock with simple, ready-to-eat real foods. Choose fresh fruit, pastured eggs, and homemade yogurt without additives. If it's never in your home, it will never make it into your stomach.

2. **Add natural sources of whole carbs, protein, and fiber —** Pastured eggs, grass fed meats, wild fish, or properly prepared legumes give you steady energy, while well-cooked vegetables, fresh fruit, and whole grains provide healthy carbs and fiber that support your gut and stretch your fullness for hours. These tips make it far easier to avoid cravings for ultraprocessed foods.

3. **Choose better versions instead of giving things up —** Keep the flavors and textures you like but swap out the junk behind them. Trade sweetened yogurt for plain yogurt with fresh fruit, switch from oily chips to air-popped popcorn, or replace soda with sparkling water and a squeeze of citrus. You still get crunch, sweetness, or fizz, but without the additives that push you toward overeating.

4. **Reshape your kitchen cues —** Just as groceries make it easier for you to choose ultraprocessed foods off the shelves, the same idea can also apply to your kitchen. Make whole foods the first thing you see and the easiest thing to grab.

   Put fruit where it's obvious, keep prepped vegetables in clear containers, and store tempting snacks far away from eye level. When the environment stops nudging you toward packaged products, your brain gradually shifts its reward signals toward real food instead.

5. **Scan ingredients like a detective —** You don't need to study every chemical name, just notice the obvious patterns. Long ingredient lists usually signal heavy industrial processing.

   Added sugars, refined flours, are red flags. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advises using the Nutrition Facts label to watch for added sugars and sodium,[14] and shorter ingredient lists generally point to foods that stay closer to their natural form.

6. **Beware of linoleic acid —** In addition to the refined sugars, emulsifiers, artificial sweeteners, and other toxins lurking in ultraprocessed foods, be on the lookout for linoleic acid (LA). Eaten in excess, LA causes mitochondrial dysfunction, which hampers your ability to produce clean cellular energy.

High amounts of LA are found in vegetable oils, such as corn, safflower, soybean, and sunflower oil. That said, minimize your intake to less than 2 grams per day to protect your health. To help you monitor your consumption, download the Mercola Health Coach app once it becomes available. The included Seed Oil Sleuth feature will help you calculate your LA intake to a tenth of a gram.

7. **Surround yourself with support —** Eating habits shift more easily when the people around you understand what you're working toward. Share your goals with friends or family or connect with communities focused on eating healthy food. If you want personalized guidance, an experienced registered dietitian nutritionist can help you create a plan that fits your health needs and lifestyle.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Ultraprocessed Foods' Impact on Public Health

Q: Are ultraprocessed foods always bad?

A: Ultraprocessed foods are consistently linked to obesity, Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and long-term metabolic decline across 104 studies referenced in The Lancet series. The research shows a clear pattern — the more of these products you eat, the worse your health outcomes tend to be.

Q: Are protein bars ultraprocessed?

A: Most protein bars fall squarely into NOVA Group 4 because they are industrial formulations made with sweeteners, emulsifiers, refined starches, synthetic flavors, and processed protein isolates. Even when the companies advertise them containing "healthy" ingredients, the long ingredient lists signal heavy processing.

Q: Is whole wheat bread ultraprocessed?

A: Whole wheat bread typically counts as an ultraprocessed food. The Lancet description of ultraprocessed foods includes mass-produced breads because they rely on industrial additives, dough conditioners, emulsifiers, and refined ingredients.

Q: Do ultraprocessed foods affect gut or mental health?

A: Research cited in the first Lancet paper explains that ultraprocessed foods drive hyper-palatability, which overwhelms digestion, and introduces endocrine-disrupting chemicals such as phthalates. This combination destabilizes the gut, disrupts appetite signals, and contributes to metabolic and inflammatory stress — factors linked to mood issues, reduced emotional resilience, and higher rates of depression.

Q: How much is too much, realistically?

A: Once UPFs make up a large share of daily calories, chronic disease risk rises sharply. A Johns Hopkins analysis found that U.S. adults already consume more than half their at-home calories from ultraprocessed foods, which is far beyond a safe threshold.

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