

Americans Favor Information and School Restrictions for Ultraprocessed Foods

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September 16, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Most Americans favor clear definitions and practical dietary guidance about ultraprocessed foods over taxes, suggesting that better information is the policy change people want most
- › Federal dietary guidelines now advise limiting highly processed foods for the first time, reflecting growing scientific concern that diets built around these products are linked to higher risks of chronic disease
- › In a tightly controlled feeding study of 20 adults housed in a metabolic ward, those who ate ultraprocessed foods consumed about 500 more calories per day than those who ate minimally processed foods, even when the diets contained similar amounts of nutrients
- › Learning how to identify ultraprocessed foods by reading ingredient lists instead of relying on front-of-package marketing gives you greater control over the food choices you make every day
- › Replacing ultraprocessed foods made with vegetable oils and long ingredient lists with minimally processed foods prepared from simple ingredients is one practical step that may support your long-term health

Ultraprocessed foods have moved from a niche nutrition concern to the center of a national debate, and researchers recently asked a question that gets skipped in most of that conversation: What do Americans actually want their government to do about it?

Not whether people think these foods are healthy, but which specific policies they'd support — official definitions, dietary guidance, school restrictions, grocery store limits, or taxes.

Unlike minimally processed foods, ultraprocessed foods are industrial formulations made with ingredients and additives that are rarely found in a home kitchen. They often contain refined starches, added sugars, industrial oils, flavor enhancers, colors, emulsifiers, and preservatives designed to improve shelf life, taste, or texture.

Researchers from Purdue University and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign reported that Americans viewed these foods as convenient and tasty, yet also unhealthy, unsafe, unnatural, and addictive.¹ What's more revealing, though, is how those perceptions translated into support, or lack of support, for actual government intervention.

Meanwhile, U.S. nutrition guidance is undergoing its biggest shift in decades: for the first time, how a food is made, not just what's in it, is becoming part of the official health conversation. That debate has expanded beyond scientific journals into schools, grocery stores, and federal nutrition policy.

I believe understanding both the science and public opinion gives you a stronger foundation for making food choices that match your own priorities instead of relying on marketing claims alone. The next step is to look closely at what the first study discovered about which ultraprocessed food policies Americans support most and why those preferences differ across the population.

Americans Back Education More Than Food Taxes

A cross-sectional survey study published in PLOS One examined how 990 U.S. adults viewed six different government approaches to [ultraprocessed foods](#), including education, restrictions, and taxes. Researchers recruited participants from across the

U.S. during February 2025 using quota sampling stratified by gender, age, income, and region. The authors note the final sample skewed toward lower-income households, one of four limitations they identify.

The researchers wanted to learn which government actions Americans actually supported and what beliefs influenced those opinions. Public opinion often shapes future nutrition policies. Instead of assuming what consumers want, the study measured it directly and identified which ideas gained the broadest acceptance and which faced the strongest resistance.

- **Support depended on what people believed about ultraprocessed foods** — The survey found that opinions were driven less by politics alone than by how participants viewed ultraprocessed foods themselves. People who believed these foods were unsafe or **addictive** consistently expressed greater support for government action, while people who viewed them as especially tasty were less likely to favor restrictions on their availability.

In other words, personal beliefs about these foods strongly influenced whether respondents thought education, restrictions, or other policy changes were appropriate. The researchers also found that people who felt more confident identifying ultraprocessed foods generally expressed stronger support for several policy options, suggesting that knowledge and awareness influence public attitudes.

- **Different groups supported different policies for different reasons** — Younger adults were less likely to support information-based policies such as official definitions and dietary guidance, yet they were more supportive of restricting ultraprocessed foods in grocery stores. Parents with children younger than 18 years were also more likely to support grocery-store restrictions, while people receiving food assistance expressed greater support for limiting ultraprocessed foods in retail settings.

Lower-income participants were less likely to support taxes or certain restrictions affecting food assistance programs. Political affiliation also influenced some responses, although not every policy divided people along political lines. For example, support for **school restrictions** remained comparatively broad across groups, showing that protecting children generated wider agreement than other proposals.

- **Taxes ranked far behind other ideas** — Information-based strategies consistently received stronger support than policies that increased costs or reduced consumer choice. Restricting ultraprocessed foods in schools attracted considerably more support than restricting them in grocery stores or limiting purchases through federal food assistance programs.

By comparison, taxing ultraprocessed foods was the least popular of the six options at 43.6% support, well behind an official definition of ultraprocessed foods (84.7%) and clearer dietary guidance (82.4%), though only modestly behind grocery-store restrictions (50.8%). School restrictions drew 68.4% support.

If you want to understand where nutrition policy is most likely to move first, this finding offers an important clue. Policymakers often advance proposals that already have substantial public support because those measures face fewer obstacles than highly controversial taxes or outright bans.

- **Knowledge gives you an advantage when food labels remain confusing** — One interesting finding involved what researchers called "subjective knowledge," meaning how confident people felt about recognizing ultraprocessed foods while shopping. This didn't necessarily mean participants were always correct. Instead, it measured whether they believed they could identify these products.

Researchers found that greater confidence generally corresponded with stronger support for several government actions. That highlights an important practical lesson. The easier it becomes to recognize heavily processed products, the easier it

becomes to compare foods, ask better questions, and make purchasing decisions that match your own priorities instead of relying solely on front-of-package marketing claims.

- **The study explains attitudes rather than proving health effects** — Unlike a clinical trial that measures changes in blood pressure, weight, or disease risk, this research focused on public opinion. It didn't test whether any proposed policy improved health, nor did it examine biological changes inside the body because that was outside the study's purpose. Instead, it identified the beliefs that predict support for different nutrition policies.

Researchers found that perceptions of safety, addictiveness, and personal knowledge consistently influenced public attitudes more strongly than many other characteristics.

That makes the findings valuable because they help explain why some food policies gain public acceptance while others struggle, offering insight into how future discussions about ultraprocessed foods are likely to develop. That preference for clarity over restriction isn't just theoretical; it's already showing up in federal policy.

Federal Dietary Guidelines Now Target Highly Processed Foods

In an editorial published in the American Journal of Public Health, nutrition scientist Marion Nestle wrote that the 2025 - 2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans marked the first time since the guidelines began in 1980 that they advised people to limit "highly processed foods."²

While the document avoided the specific term "ultraprocessed foods," Nestle explained that the recommendation clearly referred to them because the scientific review supporting the guidelines repeatedly discussed ultraprocessed foods and cited research on their health effects. She notes that the guidelines use "highly processed" as a euphemism, adopted because no consensus definition of "ultraprocessed" yet exists.

This matters because federal dietary guidelines influence everything from school meals and public health campaigns to nutrition education provided by doctors and dietitians. Even small wording changes often signal a broader shift in how nutrition experts think about healthy eating.

This is also worth reading alongside the survey findings above. Americans didn't rank official definitions and clearer dietary guidance as their top choices by accident; those are exactly the tools this guideline update relies on. Rather than restricting where ultraprocessed foods can be sold or taxing them at checkout, the federal government chose the same lever the public said it trusted most: better information. Whether that information actually changes what people buy and eat is a separate question.

- **More than 100 observational studies have examined diets high in ultraprocessed foods** — Nearly all of them report higher risks of chronic disease and earlier death among people who consume more of these products.^{3,4} Observational studies compare people's eating habits and health over time instead of assigning diets in a laboratory, so they identify relationships rather than proving direct cause and effect.

Even so, when dozens of studies continue pointing in the same direction, researchers often view the overall pattern as meaningful. If you regularly rely on packaged convenience foods, that growing consistency gives you another reason to look more closely at how much of your diet comes from heavily manufactured products.

- **One tightly controlled experiment produced striking results** — The article highlighted an unusually rigorous clinical trial of 20 adults in which volunteers lived inside a metabolic ward, meaning researchers provided every meal and carefully monitored exactly what participants ate.⁵

Each participant ate an ultraprocessed diet for two weeks and a minimally processed diet for two weeks, in randomized order. Because the volunteers remained under continuous supervision, they couldn't underestimate or misreport

their food intake. Researchers compared nutritionally similar diets that differed mainly in how processed the foods were.

Participants eating the ultraprocessed diet consumed about 500 extra calories every day without realizing it.⁶ That finding attracted attention because the foods contained similar amounts of nutrients, yet participants still ate substantially more. If your goal is to manage your appetite or maintain a healthy weight, this study suggests that the structure and formulation of food itself influence how much you naturally consume, not just the nutrition label.

Nestle notes the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee excluded this trial from its review because it was too short and too small to meet the committee's inclusion criteria – a decision she argues it should have made an exception to, since metabolic-ward studies are expensive and few volunteers will stay in one for long.

- **Scientists continue to study why these foods encourage overeating** – One criticism of ultraprocessed food research has been that the biological mechanisms are still under investigation. The article acknowledged that point but explained that newer clinical studies have produced biologically plausible results that support earlier observations.

"Biologically plausible" means the findings fit with how the human body is known to function rather than appearing random or contradictory. Researchers continue investigating how industrial processing, food texture, flavor combinations, and other characteristics influence appetite and calorie intake. That ongoing work helps explain why two foods with similar nutrition facts don't always produce the same response after you eat them.

- **Politics and industry influence nutrition debates as much as science** – The article devoted substantial attention to how scientific evidence becomes public policy. Nestle argued that disagreements often center less on whether ultraprocessed

foods deserve attention and more on how governments respond. Some groups prefer education alone, while others support broader policy tools that make healthier foods easier to obtain.

The article also discussed financial relationships between some contributors to the scientific reviews and food industry organizations, raising questions about conflicts of interest.

Specifically, Nestle reports that seven of the nine writers of the research reviews disclosed financial ties to food industry groups — four to meat and dairy organizations — leading her to conclude the guidelines "appear to have been captured by the meat and dairy industries" and to criticize them for encouraging more meat, full-fat dairy, butter, and beef tallow.

However, I don't share Nestle's concern about healthy fats. I don't consider a recommendation to eat butter, tallow, and full-fat dairy a warning sign — I regard those traditional, stable fats as far healthier than the industrial seed oils that dominate ultraprocessed foods.

Where I agree with her is the broader point: Even guidelines framed as pure science are shaped by who's in the room when they're written, which is exactly why learning to read an ingredient list yourself, rather than waiting for an official verdict, is worth doing regardless of what future guidelines say.

- **Education alone rarely changes eating habits** — Information, while valuable, doesn't consistently change what people buy or eat. Nestle argued that long-term dietary improvement requires healthier foods to become easier to find, more affordable, and more accessible through a combination of education and broader policy approaches.

If you're trying to reduce your intake of heavily processed foods, this idea offers a practical challenge. Instead of relying entirely on willpower, take inventory of your own food environment. Look at what fills your pantry, what appears most often in

your grocery cart, and which foods are easiest to grab during a busy day. Small changes to those daily habits often make healthy choices much easier to repeat.

Build a Food Environment That Works for You

Your daily food choices become much easier when you understand what you're buying and make healthier options the easiest ones to reach. Focus on changing the environment around your meals instead of relying on willpower alone. Small, consistent changes add up, especially when they become part of your routine.

- 1. Build most of your meals around minimally processed foods** — I recommend making foods that look close to the way they came from nature, the foundation of your diet. Fill your plate with vegetables, fruits, intact whole grains if you tolerate them, pasture-raised eggs, and grass fed dairy and meats instead of foods built from long ingredient lists.

Cut out ultraprocessed foods, especially those made with **vegetable oils** such as soybean, corn, safflower, sunflower, and canola oil. These oils are high in **linoleic acid** (LA), a polyunsaturated fat that oxidizes easily under heat and storage.

Those oxidation byproducts accumulate in your tissues over time and are thought to compromise mitochondrial function — the tiny structures inside your cells that produce energy — which is part of why diets high in LA are linked to inflammation and metabolic disruption.

Replace vegetable oils with more stable fats such as grass fed butter, ghee, or tallow. I recommend keeping your daily LA intake below 5 grams, with a goal of about 2 grams whenever possible. If you're unsure where to start, challenge yourself to make at least two meals each day from ingredients that require little or no industrial processing.

- 2. Read ingredient lists before you trust front-of-package claims** — A package that says "natural," "high protein," "whole grain," or "heart healthy" doesn't automatically make it a better choice. Turn the package over and read the ingredient list first.

If you see vegetable oils, refined starches, added sugars, artificial flavors, colors, **emulsifiers**, or preservatives near the top, place it back on the shelf and compare it with a simpler alternative. That habit gives you far more control than relying on marketing language.

- 3. Replace convenience foods one category at a time** — Trying to overhaul your entire pantry in one afternoon often leads to frustration. Instead, pick one category every week. Replace vegetable oils first, then frozen entrées and packaged snacks. Then sugary breakfast foods. Continue until most of your routine foods come from simpler ingredients. If you enjoy tracking progress, keep a checklist and cross off one category at a time. Small victories make lasting habits much easier to build.

- 4. Make healthier foods the easiest choice in your home** — Your environment influences your decisions every day. Keep washed fruit where you immediately see it. Prepare vegetables before you become hungry. Cook extra portions so leftovers become tomorrow's quick meal instead of reaching for packaged convenience foods. If you're a busy parent or work long hours, this one habit often saves both time and money while reducing your reliance on highly processed products.

- 5. Stay informed instead of waiting for food policy to change** — Government dietary guidelines will continue to evolve as new research becomes available, but your next meal is your decision. I recommend learning how to recognize heavily processed foods yourself rather than depending entirely on labels or advertising.

The more confident you become at identifying foods that require little industrial processing, the easier it becomes to shop with purpose and build eating habits that match your long-term health goals.

FAQs About Ultraprocessed Food Policies

Q: What are ultraprocessed foods, and why are they receiving more attention?

A: Ultraprocessed foods are industrially manufactured products made with refined ingredients and additives that are rarely found in a home kitchen. They often contain refined starches, added sugars, vegetable oils, artificial flavors, colors, emulsifiers, and preservatives.

Research linking diets high in these foods with chronic disease has prompted growing public interest and led the federal government to recommend limiting highly processed foods for the first time in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Q: What did Americans support most in the survey about ultraprocessed food policies?

A: Americans showed the strongest support for education rather than taxes. Survey participants favored official definitions of ultraprocessed foods (84.7% support) and clearer dietary guidance (82.4%), while restrictions in schools (68.4%) received more support than restrictions in grocery stores (50.8%). Taxes on ultraprocessed foods were the least popular proposal, at 43.6%.

Q: Why do ultraprocessed foods often lead people to eat more?

A: One tightly controlled clinical trial of 20 adults living in a metabolic ward, each of whom ate both diets for two weeks in randomized order, found that participants consumed about 500 additional calories each day on the ultraprocessed diet without realizing it, even though the meals contained similar amounts of nutrients.⁷

That is roughly the equivalent of an extra meal a day. Researchers are continuing to study why this happens, but current evidence suggests that the way these foods are formulated influences appetite and calorie intake beyond what appears on the

nutrition label.

Q: What is the most effective first step for reducing ultraprocessed foods?

A: Focus on replacing them with minimally processed foods instead of trying to overhaul your entire diet overnight. Build meals around foods with simple ingredient lists, avoid products made with vegetable oils such as soybean, corn, sunflower, safflower, and canola oil, and replace those oils with more stable fats like grass fed butter, ghee, or tallow. Reading ingredient lists instead of relying on front-of-package marketing also makes healthier choices much easier.

Q: Why does understanding food policy matter if I simply want to eat healthier?

A: Nutrition guidelines influence school meals, public health programs, and the information consumers receive about food. Learning how those recommendations are developed and understanding the science behind them helps you evaluate nutrition advice and make food choices based on evidence instead of advertising or food marketing.

This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Consult a qualified healthcare provider before making changes to your health regimen.

Sources and References

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